

Thomas Dermody



Thomas Dermody

Selected Writings

Edited and introduced by Michael Griffin

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Dermody, Thomas (1775–1802)
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Michael Griffin
Limerick, 2012.

Introduction

I read your last Article in *Bolster's*—you are I think too severe on [Thomas] Dermody. You make no allowance for his want of early moral or religious instruction, for he had the example of a drunken father at a period when in Ireland to be a stout drinker was considered even among the upper classes synonymous with every noble and manly quality in man. For the semibarbarous education which opened the world to his enterprising spirit but launched him on its ocean without a chart to save from its rocks and shoals. It enabled him to be a King among the rabble but left him unfit to associate with gentil and polished society. Nature and a consciousness of great talent had made him proud but he had never been taught when to check his pride and when to give it the reins. His patrons heaped favours on him but the manner of conferring them and the unseasonable advice with which a Great fool often accompanies his favours made Dermody feel himself a contemptible dependant.¹

Cork poet Jeremiah Callanan's apology for the dissolute Clare poet Thomas Dermody (1775–1802), relayed in a letter of 2 April 1828, responded to Michael McCarthy's harsh dismissal of Dermody's work in *Bolster's Quarterly Magazine*. *Bolster's* was a Cork publication touted at its launch two years earlier—ominously for Dermody's reputation—as 'the only Literary Journal in Ireland'.² In his essay, McCarthy lyrically decried the pollution of Dermody's poetic gift; he claimed 'that there lurks a reptile at the bottom of the fount,—at the very source and well-spring of inspiration, poisoning and disturbing the waters with its writhings and its slime', before concluding that 'no very distinguished or exalted station can be assigned him among the votaries of the muse'.³ Callanan sought to convey a more benign picture of Dermody; nevertheless, his account merely replaces one

1 Jeremiah J. Callanan to Michael F. McCarthy, 2 April 1828, Windele MSS 12 L/6/62, Royal Irish Academy.

2 *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 19, 58 (January 1826), 92.

3 'Thomas Dermody', *Bolster's Quarterly Magazine*, 2 (1827), 378, 395–96.

pernicious image of wasteful dissolution with another of drunken bonhomie, itself based on a slight anecdote by tavernkeeper Luke Dignam in Dun Laoghaire to the effect that, in his natural environment, Dermody was bighearted, and ‘a foolishly generous’ soul.⁴

Together, Callanan’s letter and its occasion encapsulate the enigma of Dermody: charming yet vicious, generous yet feckless, talented yet wasteful. This combination of opposed characteristics explain why Dermody received and squandered monetary and intellectual support from some of the most important cultural and political figures of his day. ‘Lost in a wilderness of folly’, noted the editors of *Anthologia Hibernica* in 1793, ‘his genius, like a gem, has long been neglected; some eye of more refined discernment may stoop to discover its native lustre’.⁵ Yet his work has not aged well.

Dermody’s career is a compelling episode in the critical period between the French Revolution and the Act of Union. It is a case study in the political ambiguity and compromise implied in an Irish context by the term ‘Romanticism’. He involved himself in the revolutionary fervour of his times but was politically and, it might be said, poetically neutered by the more conservative patriotism that characterized many of his supporters. His patrons included leading figures from the conservative wing of the Patriot movement, men like Henry Flood and Lord Charlemont, both of whom opposed the further relaxation of the Penal Laws.⁶ Dermody’s work reflects the compromises their patronage, and that of their social class, entailed.

He was a famous figure in his own day—in Ireland, and in the England to which he eventually emigrated—because of the cult of personality that surrounded him. In 1796, the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge imitated the second sonnet of four published in *Anthologia Hibernica*, which he had borrowed from the Bristol Library.⁷ Annabella Milbanke, Lord Byron’s wife, composed ‘Lines Supposed to be Spoken at the Grave of Dermody’, her attempt at Graveyard verse—a contemporary vogue to which Dermody himself had yielded. Milbanke’s poem made of the Clareman’s life a warning, ‘offering Byron the chance not to pattern his life after the unfortunate Dermody’.⁸ Robert Southey wrote to Coleridge in July 1801: ‘At Falmouth, I bought Thomas Dermody’s Poems, for old acquaintance sake; alas! the boy wrote better than the man’,⁹ a sentiment shared by

4 Callanan to McCarthy.

5 *Anthologia Hibernica*; or, Monthly Collections of Science, Belles-Lettres, and History, 1 (March 1793), 225. *Anthologia Hibernica* was printed for Richard Edward Mercier in Anglesea Street, Dublin. According to the editors in the ‘Advertisement’, it was intended to be an *Irish Gentleman’s Magazine*.

6 See Clare O’Halloran, *Golden Ages and Barbarous Nations: Antiquarian Debate and Cultural Politics in Ireland, c. 1750–1800* (Cork, 2004), 45.

7 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Works*, vol. 16: *Poetical Works: Part 1. Poems*, ed. J. C. C. Mays (Princeton, NJ: 2001), 300–02. Coleridge’s imitation was originally published in *Sonnets from Various Authors* (1796). This sonnet was the only one of the four not to be published in Dermody’s *1792 Poems*.

8 James Soderholm, *Fantasy, Forgery, and the Byron Legend* (Lexington, KY, 1996), 96. Milbanke writes: ‘Degraded genius! O’er the untimely grave/In which the tumults of thy breast were still’d/The rank weeds wave, and every flower that springs/Withers, or ere it bloom’. Cited in Soderholm, 73.

9 Robert Southey, *The Life and Correspondence of Robert Southey*, ed. Charles Cuthbert Southey, 6 vols. (London, 1849–50), vol. 2, 153.

the poet himself, who declared in ‘My Own Character. To a Lady’ that his ‘summer of genius arriv’d ere its spring’. Dermody was often likened to Thomas Chatterton, his life a cautionary tale too, both early exemplars of the romantic *poète maudit*, of a life lived passionately and quickly. He was a talismanic figure of Romanticism in England and in Ireland. He prefigured more histrionic experiments in living the ‘romantic’ life, such as that of James Clarence Mangan (1803–40); at the same time, he can be seen as a tragic contemporary of Thomas Moore (1779–1852), who much more successfully transposed patriotic feeling into a memorable form of song and music that haunted the Whig salons of London and the parlours of the Irish middle classes for decades.

Gregory Schirmer remarks that Dermody’s work scarcely resembles the Irish writing of the nineteenth century, ‘with its fusion of romantic principles and nationalist ideology. The Anglo-Irish Protestant background of these writers ... cut them off from the Gaelic culture that fed both the Romanticism and nationalism of many nineteenth-century Irish writers’. Schirmer’s contention that Dermody’s poetry ‘actively resists the constraints of eighteenth-century poetic forms and conventions’ is wrong; so too is his claim that Dermody’s background was Anglo-Irish and Protestant. ‘Most of Dermody’s poems’, argues Schirmer, ‘could as well be set in the Lake District as in his native country. The truth is that Dermody does not seem very well informed about Ireland’.¹⁰ This claim is not accurate either; his poems often took English and Scottish models, but he regularly adapted them with a degree of panache to Irish settings. He was perfectly well informed about Irish places, people, and politics, though his opinions were inconsistent and often corrupted by the need to avoid offending patrons.

Dermody often wrote rather damp poems of an aspirational and derivative sensibility;¹¹ less frequently, because of the restrictions of his material and psychological circumstances, he wrote poems of honest and boisterous wit about the predicament of the indigent, dependent author—which this selection highlights, as it also does Dermody’s considerable aptitude for plainer forms of song, epigram, and elegy. At his best—such as in the song ‘As I sat by My Fair’—his work matches Thomas Moore’s, although Dermody’s work is too uneven to be compared in terms of overall achievement. He was politically pressured by his patrons, so much so that he had to retract some of his bolder statements, perhaps most scandalously his republican pamphlet *The Rights of Justice, or Rational Liberty*, which, in 1793, proved to be too radical for the tastes of the Dublin literati. He was a show-and-tell child prodigy, a volatile young genius who might be presented in Dublin’s literary world as an occasion for self-congratulatory patronage. Dermody found himself dependent upon an economy of favour that was beginning to be outmoded. His means often determined his themes; thus, he wrote safe poems to flatter patrons, and was forced to keep his more innovative and revolutionary inclinations in check. ‘The patronage system

¹⁰ Gregory A. Schirmer, *Out of What Began: A History of Irish Poetry in English* (Ithaca, NY, 1998), 49, 52.

¹¹ On the subject, or subjects, of ‘sensibility’, see Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London and New York, 1986). See also Northrop Frye, ‘Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility’, *English Literary History*, 23 (1956), 144–52.

functioned to guarantee political quiescence as well as personal “gratitude,” writes Alan Richardson, ‘and lapses (or perceived lapses) in either could end a poet’s career.’¹² ‘Such a system’, according to Michael Scrivener, ‘infantilized plebeian poets’.¹³ Dermody, at times infantilized, was at other times evocative, witty, and irreverent—plebeian, that is, in a more transgressive manner.

James Grant Raymond’s standard *Life of Thomas Dermody* (1806) is generally hagiographical.¹⁴ It is, however, an impressive biography, and one to which all subsequent commentators are indebted. Raymond gathered an impressive array of correspondence and commentary from Dermody’s patrons.¹⁵ He was himself, towards the end of Dermody’s life, a benefactor, and by the time he came to write Dermody’s biography, he probably felt that his support for so troublesome and vexed a figure should win at least some degree of fame for himself. People wanted to be associated with Dermody, even though he could be difficult, conceited and arrogant. Dublin’s ‘people of sensibility’ were at first sufficiently intrigued by his rough indifference to subvert his self-destruction.

I Origins

In his Introduction to *Irish Minstrelsy* (1831), James Hardiman surveys the submerged legacy of those Irish bards writing in ‘that denounced language’—Irish—and, in a footnote, remarks:

12 Alan Richardson, *Literature, Education and Romanticism: Reading as Social Practice* (Cambridge, 1994), 249–50.

13 Michael Scrivener, *Seditious Allegories: John Thelwall and Jacobin Writing* (University Park, PA, 2001), 284.

14 The definitive biography of Dermody remains James Grant Raymond, *The Life of Thomas Dermody; Interspersed with Pieces of Original Poetry, many Exhibiting Unexampled Prematurity of Genuine Poetical Talent, and Containing a Series of Correspondence with Several Eminent Characters*, 2 vols. (London, 1806); all references to Raymond’s biography are henceforth abbreviated to LOD. Raymond’s substantial edition of Dermody’s poems is *The Harp of Erin, Containing the Poetical Works*, 2 vols. (London, 1807). Raymond (1771–1817) was an actor and acting manager of the Drury Lane Company at the Lyceum theatre, or English Opera House, 1809–12, and at the rebuilt Drury Lane Theatre from 1812–17. Obituary notices were published in the *European Magazine*, 73 (November 1817), 433–35, and *Gentleman’s Magazine*, 87, 2 (1817), 564. For shorter biographies of Dermody—mostly condensed from Raymond—see also Carmel O’Dwyer, ‘Thomas Dermody’, *The Other Clare*, 5 (1981), 31–33; John Carr’s biography is an appendix to *The Stranger in Ireland; or, A Tour in the Southern and Western Parts of that Country, in the Year 1805*, 3rd edn. (Philadelphia, PA, 1807), 277–334. See also Kathleen S. Knox, ‘An Irish Chatterton’, *The Shan Van Vocht*, vol. 1, nos. 9 and 10 (4 September and 2 October 1896), 171–72; 182–84.

15 Much of this correspondence is dispersed: ‘As most of the papers, etc., upon which Raymond drew for the “Life” were placed at his disposal by other persons, I conjecture that they were returned to their respective owners, and that such as are extant are widely scattered.’ G. A. Gibbs, ‘Thomas Dermody, 1775–1802’, *Notes and Queries*, 149 (1925), 208.

Had the unfortunate DERMODY been born a few years earlier, it is probable his name would appear only in the foregoing enumeration. The English tongue began to spread among the people of his native county, Clare, in the middle of the last century; and thus the talents which would have passed unnoticed, if confined to the language of his fathers, were universally admired in that of his adoption.¹⁶

Dermody remains a topic of immense interest for being the first poet of some international reputation from County Clare. The educational milieu in which his father worked, as well as the culture of print and poetry that came into existence during Dermody's childhood, meant that, for all of his chafing at provincial seclusion, there existed in Ennis in the 1780s a culture that equipped him very well for anglophone literary celebrity.

By 1808, Hely Dutton could write that the Irish language in the county had gone into something like terminal decline, stating that no Irish

is spoken in any of the schools, and the peasantry are anxious to send their children to them for the purpose of learning English. I am informed very little pure Irish is spoken in this county, the present language being a jargon of Irish and English; therefore the sooner it is forgotten, the better.¹⁷

Dutton's recommendation for the future of the Irish language is biased and characteristically supercilious; but his observations about the state of the language are not too wide of the mark. Gerard O'Brien has written that the 'crucial years' in the decline of the Irish language 'appear to have been 1780–1800'. This was especially true of towns such as Ennis. As O'Brien observes, surveyors often noted that 'spoken Irish tended to fade when in close contact with commerce, local administration, and an atmosphere of relative prosperity';¹⁸ also, the fate of Irish was linked to the development of schooling in a given area.

Dermody was born in Ennis on 17 January 1775, and lived there until the age of ten when, following the death of his brother—lamented in 'Corydon. A Monody'—and the lapse of his father into another of his alcoholic derelictions, he absconded to Dublin. His father was Nicholas Dermody, the sixth son of a substantial farmer, educated at a

16 James Hardiman, *Irish Minstrelsy; Or, Bardic Remains of Ireland, with English Poetical Translations*, 2 vols. (1831; Shannon, 1971), vol. 1, xxivn. Valuable work has been done on Irish-language poetry in the county in the eighteenth century: see Brian Ó Dálaigh, 'Tomás Ó Míocháin and the Ennis School of Gaelic Poetry', *Dal gCais*, 11 (1993), 55–73; and Liam de Paor, 'The World of Brian Merriman: County Clare in 1780', *Landscape with Figures: People, Culture and Art in Ireland and the Modern World* (Dublin, 1998), 37–64.

17 Hely Dutton, *Statistical Survey of the County of Clare, with Observations on the Means of Improvement; Drawn Up for the Consideration, and by Direction of the Dublin Society* (Dublin, 1808), 302–03.

18 Gerard O'Brien, 'The Strange Death of the Irish Language, 1780–1800', in Gerard O'Brien (ed.), *Parliament, Politics and People: Essays in Eighteenth-Century Irish History* (Dublin, 1989), 158, 160. By 1800, writes Maureen Wall, 'Irish had ceased to be the language habitually spoken in the homes of all those who had already achieved success in the world, or who aspired to improve or even maintain their position politically, socially or economically'. 'The Decline of the Irish Language', in Brian Ó Cuív (ed.), *A View of the Irish Language* (Dublin, 1969), 82.

celebrated seminary in Clonmel, County Tipperary. At age twenty-two, Nicholas went to Limerick, where he was recommended as a tutor to the son of John Scott of Cahircon House, an extensive landowner around Kildysert in Clare. Having married on the 14 November 1773, he became a teacher of the classics in Ennis, where he established a small school on Church Street. There he earned himself a solid reputation as a teacher, and was well respected as a Greek and Latin scholar. But Nicholas began drinking; the number of students attending his school dropped. For a spell, the family moved to Galway town, where Nicholas made another abortive attempt in educational entrepreneurship, before returning to Ennis. Thomas, already a talented scholar of the classics at the remarkably young age of nine, became his father's teaching assistant. Nicholas's educational career stumbled; he had established himself in the 1770s, but there are several notices in Clare newspapers of Nicholas's school being reopened, no doubt after being closed for intervals on account of his drinking.

By the age of ten, young Thomas had already composed a good deal of poetry, much of which was tentative translations from the classics. However, he had also begun to mix with his father's drinking clique, people of those lower classes in Ennis characterized by Brian Ó Dálaigh as a 'large miscellaneous group of people who made their livelihoods through activities associated with the market place. Hucksters, hawkers, pedlars, meal women, turf sellers and vendors of all kinds infested the market place and were the scourge of the corporation.'¹⁹ Dermody moved between the bilingual, though largely illiterate, Ennis underclass and the primarily English-language world of 'polite' poetry and academic achievement, as he acknowledged later in his poem, 'An Ode to Myself'. Though he followed his poetic career primarily in Dublin, it may be said that the dualities expressed in this defining poem were formed in Ennis, where Dermody learned his drinking and his poetry together.

Schoolmaster and poet John Lloyd described Ennis in particularly benign terms in his *Short Tour; or, An Impartial and Accurate Description of the County of Clare* (1780), the first book published in the county. It was

a Rich, Inland, Assizes Town, and a Borough, handsome and uniform, the Streets are well pay'd and regular, the Shops neat and well furnish'd; here are a magnificent Court-House with a stately exchange: a grand Academical School, an Infirmary, a House of Industry with many more excellent Buildings, and two Religious Houses, all which are extremely well Executed; here are likewise, Bolting Mills, &c. &c. which for Execution and Elegance of Construction are not inferior to any of the Kind

19 Brian Ó Dálaigh, *Ennis in the Eighteenth Century: Portrait of an Urban Community* (Dublin, 1995), 36.

in this Kingdom, this Town in general is populous, the Inhabitants are liberally humane and laudably accomplish'd with the praise-worthy Notions of Industry — here are two plentiful Markets held on Tuesdays and Saturdays.²⁰

Under the Cromwellian settlement, Catholic merchants in Ireland could not operate within the boundaries of a walled city. At the end of the eighteenth century, Ennis was an unwalled county town of roughly five thousand inhabitants, with the legal consequence that Catholic merchants could move freely between the town and the surrounding countryside. Catholic Limerick merchants also migrated to Ennis, thereby creating a corridor of trade and social exchange between the two towns. Many contemporary commentators, indeed, remarked upon the town's strong preponderance of Catholics. John Wesley observed in June of 1756 that Ennis was 'a town consisting almost wholly of papists, except a few Protestant gentlemen', and two years later that in 'Ennis many suppose there are not less than fifty papists to one Protestant'. Chief Baron Edward Willes wrote to the earl of Warwick in 1761 that

The town of Ennis is a dirty old town; streets very narrow. I believe it is near as big as Stratford upon Avon; nothing worth remarking as I heard of in the town ... However, 'tis large enough for the Protestant inhabitants for, except the people of fashion a pretty many of whom live in and near this town, the common people are in general papists.²¹

The placid picture of Clare painted by Lloyd reflects a general sense, conveyed in newspapers and magazines of this time, that the county was unaffected by political or religious strife. 'Nothing opposite to good Harmony and Understanding subsists here', wrote Lloyd; 'no Seditious Factions, Nocturnal Meetings, or Intestine Broils, are ever known or Practised in the County CLARE, as have been apparent in other Parts of this Kingdom'.²² This may have been partially true, though no doubt sectarian tensions over legal exclusions would have simmered. Other accounts of the county in the 1770s and 1780s suggest that the surface calm was no more than that. In 1771, wrote Patrick White in his *History of Clare*, 'so long after the Williamite subjugation, the county had scarcely yet begun to recover from the prostrate condition into which it had been flung'.²³ Though White does concede that religious toleration increased as the century neared its end.

20 John Lloyd, *A Short Tour; or, An Impartial and Accurate Description of the County of Clare, with Some Particular and Historical Observations* (Ennis, 1780). This text is more readily available as *Lloyd's Tour of Clare 1780, from Henn's Exact Reprint of 1893* (1893; Whitegate, 1986), 30–31. All subsequent references are to this text.

21 Brian Ó Dálaigh (ed.), *The Stranger's Gaze: Travels in County Clare 1534–1950* (Ennis, 1998), 110, 111, 113.

22 *Lloyd's Tour*, 58–59.

23 Rev. P. White, PP, VG, *History of Clare and the Dalcassian Clans of Tipperary, Limerick, and Galway* (1893; Cork, 1973), 312.

Lloyd was a Limerickman who spent most of his life in Clare.²⁴ He became more famous as a Jacobite poet in Irish than as the author of the *Short Tour*. He may have adjusted his benign portrait of contemporary Clare life towards the sensitivities of his patrons, the Henns; he described their manicured lands along the Shannon estuary as ‘a Munster Paradise ... among the first and most Eligible Seats in this Kingdom’. Lloyd had taught in Dunaha, Kilrush, and in the Ennis school of the political radical and poet Tomás Ó Míocháin. But Lloyd’s position at Ó Míocháin’s school was, according to Henry Henn, lost because of his ‘intemperate habits’.²⁵ He moved on to Tulla and eventually to Toureen, where he composed his *Short Tour*. It was there, not long after he had written it, that he was found dead by the side of the road. In spite of their abortive educational collaboration, Ó Míocháin subsequently put up money, and wrote a poetic prologue for, Lloyd’s book:

Such copious Blessings, doubtless, my dear Lloyd,
 For ages past our peaceful Land enjoy’d;
 ’Till Fate adverse, this inauspicious Time,
 Has chang’d it’s Luck the Custom and the Clime!
 And now, alas! we see it quite distress’d,
 By Taxes weak’ned and it’s Trade repress’d!
 The tenant wreck’d, unable to pay Rent,
 The needy Landlord driving for Content;
 Some gen’rous Souls, that would distress assuage,
 Of Means bereft, or, in the Debtor’s Cage;
 Pure Wit and Parts eclips’d and disrespected,
 Our native Tongue most shamefully rejected;
 A Tongue primitive, florid and Sublime,
 Of nervous Force in either Prose or Rhime.²⁶

Ó Míocháin’s poem is a compelling lament for the accelerating decline of Irish in Clare towards the end of the eighteenth century, and an indictment of the economic conditions which helped to weaken it. His complaint about cultural change echoes the language of a radical, near-contemporary critique of the negligence and greed of exploitative landlords, Westmeath poet Laurence Whyte’s ‘The Parting Cup; or, The Humours of *Deoch an Doruis*’,

24 ‘The fact that the migration of schoolmasters was more from Limerick to Clare (Lloyd himself being the striking example) than in the reverse way illustrates also the vitality of the region’. L. M. Cullen, ‘Patrons, Teachers and Literacy in Irish: 1700–1850’, in Mary Daly and David Dickson (eds.), *The Origins of Popular Literacy in Ireland: Language Change and Educational Development 1700–1920* (Dublin, 1990), 38.

25 Henry Henn, Preface, *Lloyd’s Tour*, no page numbers.

26 *Lloyd’s Tour*, iii–iv. Meehan’s Ó Míocháin’s poem is dated 24 May 1779.

published in Dublin in 1740.²⁷ Both Whyte and Ó Míocháin were teachers of mathematics (Whyte taught in Dublin), and their poems, separated by almost forty years, are at one in their condemnation of the landlord class. Ó Míocháin had probably read Whyte's work. It is also possible that the influence of Whyte's poem on fellow Westmeath poet Oliver Goldsmith was absorbed indirectly in Clare, for Goldsmith's poetry was widely read throughout Ireland from its initial publication. Dermody himself demonstrated such an influence, rewriting Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* as 'The Frequented Village'.²⁸

And yet, Ó Míocháin's poetry in English does not go as far, politically, as his manuscript poetry. In Irish, Ó Míocháin is on occasion openly seditious in celebrating the humiliation of the English in their colonial endeavours. His drinking song of 1776, 'Ar dTréigean Bhoston d'Arm Shasana, 1776', celebrates General William Howe's evacuation of Boston on 17 March 1776, an engagement in which George Washington commanded the besieging American army:

Is fonn 's is aiteas liom Howe is na Sasanaigh
 Tabhartha, treascartha choíche,
 Is an crobhaire, Washington, cabharthach, calma,
 I gceann is i gceannas a ríochta;
 Sin amhais ag screadaigh gan chúil, gan charaid,
 Gan trúip ná barcaibh ar taoide,
 Faoi Shamhain go dearfa búir na Breatain'
 I bponc faoi thearmainn Laoisigh.²⁹

- 27 'The Lands are all monopoliz'd,/The Tenants racked and sacrific'd,/Whole Colonies to shun the Fate,/Of being oppress'd at such a Rate/By Tyrants who still raise their Rent,/Sail'd to the Western Continent,/Rather than live at home like slaves,/They trust themselves to Wind and Waves'. Laurence Whyte, 'The Parting Cup, or, The Humours of Deoch an Doruis, alias Theodoros, alias Doctor Dorus, an old Irish Gentleman famous (about 30 Years ago) for his great Hospitality, but more particularly in Christmas Time', *Poems on Various Subjects* (Dublin, 1740), 92.
- 28 Goldsmith's importance in Clare as a champion of the rights of the poor against the abuses of the rich is further evidenced in a piece by 'A O. L.' entitled 'An Irish Peasant', published in the *Ennis Chronicle* on 8 September 1788: 'To my countrymen in general I shall only repeat those beautiful lines of Goldsmith's and warn them to take care of driving a number of people to desperation: Prelates — nay Kings may flourish or may fade,/A breath may make them, as a breath has made;/But a bold Peasant — a nation's pride,/If once destroy'd, can ne'er be supply'd'. 'Dermody's romantic rewriting of Goldsmith's 'The Deserted Village' writes Gregory Schirmer, 'a poem entitled 'The Fragmented Village,' transforms sweet Auburn into an Edenic place that betrays a remarkable naivete on Dermody's part' (*History of Irish Poetry*, 52). Though he gets the name of Dermody's adaptation of Goldsmith wrong, Schirmer's point is sound.
- 29 Quoted in Vincent Morley, *Irish Opinion and the American Revolution, 1760–1783* (Cambridge, 2002), 111, where Ó Míocháin's lines are translated: 'It's a joy and a pleasure to me that Howe and the English, are spent and destroyed for ever, and stalwart Washington, supporting, courageous, is at the helm and in command of his realm; behold the mercenaries screaming without a refuge or city, without troops, without ships on the sea, and by Halloween it's certain that the British boors, will be trapped and in the custody of Louis [XVI]'. See also Ó Dálaigh, 'Tomás Ó Míocháin'; and Liam de Paor's introduction to Diarmuid Ó Muirithe's edition of *Tomás Ó Míocháin, Filíocht* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1988), 10–32.

The pro-American sentiment in Ó Míocháin's verse is linked, curiously, to a residual Jacobitism. Support for the Americans and the exiled Stuarts, superficially ill-matched, chime in their support of national independence and hostility to English interests. Thus, it was not just the ferment of ideas in Dublin that led Dermody to compose *The Rights of Justice*: radical ideas, and statements of support for the American colonists such as those expressed in poetry by Ó Míocháin, circulated in the schools of Gaelic poetry in the Ennis of his youth. Poets such as Lloyd, Ó Míocháin, and Brian Merriman, author of the most famous eighteenth-century poem in Irish, *Cúirt an Mheán Oíche* (1780), were all teachers and poets in Clare during this period. Ennis was no colonial metropolis; its allegiances were to the older culture. As fellow members of the teaching profession, Nicholas Dermody and his young son would have imbibed some of the anti-establishment sentiment of the Gaelic poets.

Poetic subversions in Irish notwithstanding, the general purpose of the educational culture in Ennis, in which Dermody's father was a minor and wayward figure, was to install the English language. For those at the higher end of the social spectrum, the leading schools were the Erasmus Smith and Charter Schools. In 1733, according to Ignatius Murphy, the Charter Schools were explicit in their attempts to spread 'English' attributes and to engender Protestant virtues. W. E. H. Lecky later wrote that the schools 'offered a people thirsting for knowledge a cup which they believed to be poison, and sought, under the guise of the most seductive of all charities, to rob the children of the birthright of their faith'.³⁰ As the century progressed, and particularly following Luke Gardiner's Catholic Relief Act of 1782, the strictures on Catholic educators and education were lifted and a new ecumenism was introduced, though the Act did little more, according to O'Brien, 'than to confer legal recognition on a situation which had long existed'.³¹ From 1782 Catholics were allowed to teach in schools, but only when licensed to do so by a Protestant bishop. Following a degree of legal recognition, Catholic teachers began to advertise their small classical and mathematical schools in local newspapers; Nicholas Dermody and Tomás Ó Míocháin both placed notices in the *Ennis Chronicle* in the 1790s.³² The Dermodys never converted; Thomas, tellingly, demonstrates in his poem 'To the Catholics of Ireland' that he was sensitive to the country's recent history of penal exclusion. There was an educational hierarchy of at least two tiers; Nicholas and his young

30 W. E. H. Lecky, *A History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century*, 5 vols. (London, 1902), vol. 1, 235. On the general proselytizing mission of education policy in eighteenth-century Ireland, see Kenneth Milne, *The Irish Charter Schools, 1730–1830* (Dublin, 1997); and his 'Irish Charter Schools', *Irish Journal of Education*, 8 (1874), 3–29.

31 O'Brien, 'The Strange Death of the Irish Language', 167.

32 'Nicholas DERMODY's Classical School has been opened on the 4th inst in Church St., Ennis', *Ennis Chronicle*, 11 January 1790; and 'Nicholas DERMODY has opened his Classical School ... apply at his lodgings at the Causeway', *Ennis Chronicle*, 9 May 1796. See Rosemary Ffolliott, *Index to Biographical Notices in Newspapers of Limerick, Ennis, Clonmel & Waterford, 1758–1821* (microform, National Library of Ireland). 'A Mathematical school. Thomas Meehan most humbly acquaints his most respectable friends in the county of Clare that the amendment in his health from the use of Mallow waters these three successive seasons will enable him to resume his school in Ennis about the 1st July next. Grown up youth who wish for speedy improvement will be fitted as usual for such departments of life as require the practical use of accompts and Mathematics', *Ennis Chronicle*, 18 June 1792.

assistant found themselves teaching on the lower half of that system. Nicholas's school taught the international languages of the classics and English, the practical language of administration. Where proselytism had failed, the spread of the language in the town of Ennis was a considerable consolation prize for those who had sought to inculcate some sense of loyalty to England—although the English language would, towards the century's end, become the medium for other forms and levels of political disaffection.



Ennis was the last Munster county town to publish its own newspaper. Though Dublin and Limerick newspapers and magazines such as *Pue's Occurrences*, *Faulkner's Dublin Journal*, and the *Limerick Journal* circulated in Ennis from the 1720s onwards, Clare's first printing press arrived in Ennis only in 1778. John Busted and George Trinder, who were to publish Lloyd's *Short Tour*, launched their *Clare Journal* in 1778; a second newspaper, the *Ennis Chronicle*, was launched in 1784. The role of the newspaper in the construction and consolidation of political opinion and identity was central. Ó Dálaigh asserts that the printing press 'provided the community with a coherent means of expressing itself, it heightened the sense of local identity and focused the life of town and country in a manner that no other development had previously done'.³³ Local printing also galvanized the rise of English in the county; as Niall Ó Cíosáin has argued, Irish came to be characterized as an oral or manuscript language at the same time that English became the 'printed' language.³⁴

The *Clare Journal* sold at three halfpence, and was printed every Monday and Thursday. Little is known about George Trinder; John Busted was of a Cork publishing family.³⁵ The express reason for Busted's and Trinder's venture was: 'That the County of Clare is inhabited by a respectable Number of Nobility and Gentry, Lovers of Literature.'³⁶ The editors tried to claim that their initial motivations were philanthropic, or at least of the

33 Ó Dálaigh, *Ennis in the Eighteenth Century*, 56.

34 See Niall Ó Cíosáin, 'Printed Popular Literature in Irish 1750–1850: Presence and Absence', in Daly and Dickson (eds.), *The Origins of Popular Literacy in Ireland*, 45–57.

35 George Busted was a printer and publisher in Cork's Castle Street (1764–66), and in Paul Street for the following two years. He printed and published the *Cork Chronicle or Universal Register* from 1764 to 1768, retiring, or possibly dying, in that year. It is unclear whether John Busted, the Ennis publisher, was son or brother of George. He took up the Cork publishing venture after George's death, but called it instead the *Cork Chronicle or Free Intelligencer*, 1769–72. He was subsequently involved in the publication of the *Hibernian Morning Post or Literary Chronicle* from 1773 to 1776. Busted also printed for the Cork City Corporation from 1768 to 1776. In 1778, he moved to Ennis, where he began work with George Trinder on the *Clare Journal*. See Robert Munter, *A Dictionary of the Print Trade in Ireland 1550–1775* (New York, 1988), 43. Little can be ascertained about the life or career of George Trinder, though he was given the freedom of Ennis borough on 29 September 1778, the year of the *Clare Journal's* launch. See Brian Ó Dálaigh, ed., *Corporation Book of Ennis* (Dublin, 1990), 249.

36 *Clare Journal*, 8 June 1778.

'improving' rather than the commercial variety. They coaxed their intended audience, the well-to-do populace of Clare, that they would, or should, be willing to encourage such an enterprise, as it would reflect on its cosmopolitan modernity, and *politesse*.

The printing trade in Clare took no cognizance of any Irish-speaking culture in its environs. The *Clare Journal* was directed primarily at Protestants, and certainly at the English-speaking world, though it did on occasion publish advertisements in English from ordinarily Irish-language poets such as Ó Míocháin. The paper aimed not only to appeal to people's sense of their own sophistication, but to stimulate commercial activity by making it much easier and cheaper.³⁷

Most of the *Clare Journal's* materials were reports of foreign news, and the emphasis was Anglocentric, certainly; there was, however, a special concern with events in America. British packets were the primary source of London affairs, and leading news items were often reprints from the *London Gazette*. Of the four pages of each issue, only the last section of the third page and the fourth page contained material of local import; much of that, however, consisted of reports from local race-meetings and advertisements. More importantly, the local press allowed for a greater alignment of regional and national identity. McClintock Dix writes that:

In the political movements leading up to the establishment of the Volunteers in Ireland, as a more national spirit developed, there was sometimes felt the need of a local newspaper to promote the movement, and its starting was undoubtedly in some cases the cause of the introduction of the printing-press into that place.³⁸

The Clare newspapers became a key organ of communication between the nascent Volunteers, initially gathering in Clare to counter 'illegal acts of outrage', which had recently been committed by the 'lower Class of People' in the town and neighbourhood of Ennis. For all of the vigilante bluster, however, much early Volunteer activity in Clare, as elsewhere, consisted of dressing up in paramilitary garb, drinking and toasting. On Tuesday 17 November 1778, for example, the Ennis Volunteers, dressed in their uniforms, marched from the courthouse to Lifford, outside Ennis, where they were entertained for breakfast, after which they organized in a meadow near the house, 'and fired twelve rounds each, with all military exactness, to the general satisfaction of a number of spectators.

37 'The advantages arising, to the County in general, from the Printing of a News-Paper among Themselves, must be obvious to every intelligent Person, when He considers, the great Disadvantages the Gentleman, Trader, and Farmer labour under, for Want of an established Channel, through which to convey their Intentions of Setting their Lands, and Selling their Goods; some having Recourse to one Limerick Paper, others to another, and some to both, being doubtful which is the most eligible Method; but a Paper circulating through their own County, removes the Uncertainty, and affords the only proper Method of Conveyance, to which the other two together, cannot be adequate.' *Clare Journal*, 8 June 1778.

38 E. R. McClintock Dix, *List of Books, Newspapers and Pamphlets Printed in Ennis, Co. Clare, in the Eighteenth Century* (Dublin, 1912), 8.

They then repaired to a house near Lifford, where an elegant dinner was provided, and drank several loyal and patriotic toasts'.³⁹ One year later, the *Clare Journal* contains the following extempore effusion, 'On seeing the ENNIS VOLUNTEERS under Arms':

See yonder Corps parading and marching
 o'er the green,
 Stout hearted, brave, and daring, as ever
 Monarch seen;
 Their martial looks do tell us, no dangers can
 them scare,
 Intrepid Irish Heroes are ENNIS
 VOLUNTEERS.

Let Lewy vainly boasting still use his
 Gasconade,
 And praise his French Gend'armes his Irish
 grand Brigade;
 But what are those Soupe Meagres spurr'd
 on by dread and fear,
 Compared to brave Hibernians or ENNIS
 VOLUNTEERS.

Nay George our Gracious Monarch who fills
 the English throne,
 Were he to view those Heroes, protectors of
 his crown;
 Would smile at the proud Spaniard and laugh
 at vain Monsieur,
 And praise the martial ardour of the ENNIS
 VOLUNTEERS.

Like to a Roman phalanx, those Heroes
 march the fields,
 As dauntless and courageous as ever sword
 did wield;
 Nay Prussia's veteran warriors all cover'd
 o'er with scars,
 Could not surpass the order of ENNIS
 VOLUNTEERS.

³⁹ *Clare Journal*, 19 November 1778.

Then lads your glasses bumper and toast the
 Ennis Corps,
 Let fame proclaim their Valour, around the
 Gallic shore;
 And tell these damn'd invaders, we'd soon
 take off their ears,
 For Ireland's flocked with Heroes like ENNIS
 VOLUNTEERS.⁴⁰

Such sentiments would be partially echoed in Irish by Ó Míocháin, who composed 'Moladh na Volunteers' in 1782. Ó Míocháin's goodwill, perhaps naïve, was modified by the split in the Ennis Volunteers when the Earl of Inchiquin raised a battalion of Fencibles—the Munster Union—in September of 1782, an instance of the conservative reaction against the parliamentary reforms of that year. Ó Míocháin responded, accordingly, with 'Ar n-Éirí na Fencibles', in which he expressed his continued admiration for the Volunteers and his disdain for Inchiquin.⁴¹

The *Clare Journal's* coverage of local activities decreased quickly; from the 1780s onwards, it was increasingly concerned with events in Dublin and beyond. Between the 1770s and the 1790s, local newspapers helped to nourish connections between local and national, national and international issues. In the 1790s, the *Journal* included news of events and proceedings from the National Assembly in Paris; from 1794, United Irish correspondences and critical accounts of the philosophy of Thomas Paine were published. Even though Clare was remote from centres of radical activity, it was not alien to the modes of paramilitary organization that would be gradually radicalized towards the end of the century; nor were the county's citizens ignorant of developments in America and France. The paper also contributed to the diffusion of the ideas of the continental Enlightenment. In the edition of Thursday 23 July 1778, for instance, there appeared a poem, 'On the Death of Francis De Voltaire, Lord of Ferney. By M. de Marmontel, translated from a French MS. Handed about at Paris'. Subsequently, and more indicative of the *Journal's* increasingly cautious politics, the front page featured, on 27 June 1792, a translated 'Letter from M. L'Abbé Raynal, to the National Assembly', lamenting the excesses of the French Revolution.



⁴⁰ *Clare Journal*, 22 November 1779.

⁴¹ See Ó Míocháin, *Filíocht*, 78–81; and Ó Dálaigh, 'Tomás Ó Míocháin', 63–64.

The local printing of original literary material in English was also of some influence on Dermody's early intellectual development. Literary columns in the *Clare Journal* included genre poems of variable quality as well as moral fables and exotic pastorals. All of the literary work was anonymous—some initialled, some contributed by local authors. The poetry was generally influenced by the contemporary vogue for 'sensibility', sometimes sternly moral in its stance, usually maudlin in its tone. Much of the material dealt in matters of courtship or practical morality; occasionally a poem edged towards the libertine or bawdy, such as 'A Riddle for the Ladies', composed specifically for the *Journal*:

Impress'd by love and bred with pain,
Soft offspring of desire,
I something seem yet nothing am
And pure as vital fire.

Soft as when Zephyr fans the trees
On balmy breathings of the south
Sweet as is India's spicy breeze
Or lovely Chloe's fragrant mouth.

I own no features, shape or mien,
Complexion brown or fair:
Felt I am soft, but rarely seen,
Yet boast a gentle air.

In sweet recess conceal'd I lie,
Where Chloe's hand is often press'd;
Oh Strephon, would's't thou then be by,
How amply might thy hopes be bless'd!

Whilst thus I'm breathing in the fair,
How can she hide the conscious grief?
Yet even amidst the pregnant care,
I've oft the power to yield relief.

Mature, I urge my destin'd birth,
By Damon's vows betray'd;
Chloe in private brings me forth,
Yet Chloe's still a maid.⁴²

42 *Clare Journal*, 10 December 1778.

The pastoral names and the riddled entity in this piece recall ‘Strephon and Chloe’, Jonathan Swift’s famous poem of 1731, in which newly-weds quickly discover each other’s gross and flatulent physicality. Whether safe or risqué, most of the poetry looked towards metropolitan standards; native brio was never as important, in the poetry columns of the Clare papers, as rectitude. Dermody often chose to compose in more conventional forms. He probably felt that his poetry would achieve greater recognition if he wrote with a London audience in mind. The sentiments of his rowdier poems would, he suspected, have a lesser appeal, both in their content and in what they revealed about their author’s predilections.

In 1784, six years after the launch of the *Clare Journal*, a second English-language organ of news, commerce, and amusement—the *Ennis Chronicle*—appeared. Though it appeared too late, perhaps, to have impinged substantially upon Dermody’s consciousness—he was just about to leave Ennis when it was first published—the *Chronicle* nonetheless provides an insight into the formative influences at work on the young poet. His upbringing at the hands of a drunken, though talented and charming father, for instance, finds a humorous reflection in the programmatic fecklessness of ‘A Short System of Education or Ten Minutes Advice to Parents’, containing sixteen principles on the rearing of children. Dermody had first-hand experience of the *laissez-faire* parenting advocated in the final four dictates:

XIII. In the choice of books, horses, women, and other articles of genteel life, you are never to interfere. It is they who are to read the books, ride the horses, &c. and not you.

XIV. The period of life between infancy and manhood, commonly called youth, is to be abolished. Manhood to commence at twelve years old, and womanhood at ten.

XV. After the said ages, your authority ceases. The only privilege you retain is, to determine whether you pay their expence-bills—in bank or in cash!

XVI. Swearing, drinking, wenching, and gaming, being the product of this system of education, are of course to be overlooked.⁴³

Following the example of the *Clare Journal*, the ‘Poets’ Corner’ was a regular feature in the *Ennis Chronicle*; this forum, however, was characterized by polite sentiment and refined feeling. Sighing, tenderness, trembling, pitying eyes and bleeding hearts: all were stock images of sensibility and illustrated the pervasive influence of wider literary trends in Clare through the 1780s. Dermody demonstrates his own literary propensity to parade a keen emotional sensitivity as, for instance, in his ‘Elegy to Florelia’ of 1792. A good deal of his writing exploits the pathos of a doomed adolescence, a much-favoured intensifying trope of contemporary ‘sensibility’. Thus Dermody was often associated with the English types of an irretrievably forlorn fate—Thomas Chatterton and Richard Savage.

43 *Ennis Chronicle*, 4 September 1788.

It was not, therefore, just a fully attuned sense of contemporary literary fashion that Dermody took with him from Ennis to Dublin and London. Familial example had led him to seek the company of the ‘lower orders’, such as those with whom he loitered in Ennis. His drinking, like that of the father he left behind and of his father’s fellow teacher John Lloyd, was his ruination. Dermody set off for Dublin, according to the romantic biography, with just a couple of shillings to keep him, and volume two of Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* under his arm. Fielding’s picaresque novel, along with other contemporary classics such as *Moll Flanders*, was standard reading for the literate and growing English-speaking commercial circles in the Ennis that Dermody now left behind.

2 Career

Upon his arrival in Dublin, Dermody was hired as an assistant, or shop-boy, by a bookseller named Lynch. Lynch’s shop was a haunt for the collegians, who were quickly intrigued by the young prodigy. In 1786, the republican playwright Robert Houlton⁴⁴ saw the eleven-year-old reading Longinus in the bookshop. He remarked: ‘I could not but contemplate him as an infant philosopher, or as a little being composed entirely of mind.’⁴⁵ Inspecting Dermody’s translations and sonnets, Houlton was particularly impressed by ‘The Sensitive Linnet’. Dermody’s ‘conversation, in particular, was frequently distinguished for observations so much beyond his years’, though the poet betrayed ‘a spark of impatience under gentle rebuke’.⁴⁶ Dermody impressed, but no doubt also alarmed Houlton when he mused that the first verse of the epitaph of Thomas Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751) would not be unsuitable for his own tombstone:

Here rests his head upon the lap of earth
A youth to fortune and to fame unknown.
Fair Science frowned not on his humble birth,
And melancholy marked him for her own.

For a boy aged just eleven years, such premature morbidity was noteworthy.

Houlton left the city on business in the country, knowing that Dermody was restless. He provided for him and let him go, never to see him again. Dermody wasted Houlton’s donation within a few days. For a while, Dermody consorted with Coyle, a scene painter

44 Author of *A Selection of Political Letters ... Under the Signatures of Junius-Brutus, Hampden, the Constitutional Watchman, and Lucius Hibernicus* (Dublin, 1782), as well as musical pieces for the Dublin Stage, including *Gibraltar* (1783), and *Orfeo and Euridice* (1784).

45 LOD, vol. 1, 28.

46 LOD, vol. 1, 37–38.

at the Theatre Royal who had worked on Houlton's house. Coyle's wife charged him with errands, which he considered beneath him. Coyle remarked to Raymond: 'I thought him rather a burden, and wished him to get another home; but could not find it in my heart to turn him out ... he refused to go to the theatre, as he considered himself above the common rank.'⁴⁷ Dermody took food to Coyle and assisted him at work nonetheless, and for a while, his conduct improved. Coyle's superintendent was impressed by one of Dermody's improvised poems. On receiving news that there was a child prodigy on the premises, the performers rushed to meet him, among them the actor Robert Owenson, who would become a long-term benefactor. Owenson took Dermody home to meet his family, and Dermody became very friendly with Owenson's daughters, Sydney and Olivia. The former became Lady Morgan, author of the seminal national tale *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806).

Sydney Owenson and Dermody expressed their mutual admiration in poetry. In her Goldsmithian 'Retrospection. Written on the Author's Visiting the Home of Her Childhood After an Absence of Eight Years', Sydney reminisces about her mother and her passing, and about Dermody's influence on her as a young poet:

And you my some-time brother, o'er whose birth
 Genius presided! wit new strung his lyre;
 The muse her future bard to slumbers sung
 And e'en his lisping numbers did inspire!

Thus form'd my infant taste, and from thy lips,
 My mind imbib'd th'enthusiastic glow;
 The love of literature, which thro' my life
 Heighten'd each bliss, and soften'd every woe!⁴⁸

Sydney's mother, too, took to the young poet. According to Raymond, Jane Owenson, 'being a lady of extreme feeling and sensibility, on seeing before her a child so forlorn and destitute, she burst into a flood of tears, clasped him in her arms, and gave vent to the noblest feelings of humanity'.⁴⁹ Her daughter also remembers her mother's first response to Dermody's name, though rather differently:

My mother looked rather scared. 'Dermody! what a Papist name!' The servant was desired to wait awhile, and my father, turning to my mother, said in a deprecating tone—

47 LOD, vol. 1, 60–61.

48 Sydney Owenson, *Poems* (Dublin, 1801), 95–96.

49 LOD, vol. 1, 69.

‘By-the-Bye, Jenny, my dear, I have found the greatest prodigy that has ever appeared since Chatterton, or your own Pope, who wrote beautiful poetry at fourteen’, and he gave her some rapid details which touched her feelings.

My mother was at once prepared to receive a guest so adapted to all her sympathies and tastes, and when James introduced a pale, melancholy-looking boy—shy and awkward—she pointed to a chair, and my father, filling him out a glass of port, cheered him up with many pleasant observations, while my mother listened to his story, artlessly told, with profound interest. The next day Dermody came to our house to make it his future home, and from that time forth he was treated as a child of the family. Well dressed, well cared for, his improvement in personal appearance and in spirits metamorphosed him into a very personable young gentleman.⁵⁰

Robert Owenson introduced the poet to university circles, presenting him first to Matthew Young, Trinity Professor and afterwards bishop of Clonfert, under whom, it was intended, Dermody would study.⁵¹ Dermody, however, despised as drudgery his studies with Young. More importantly for Dermody’s poetic career, another mentor was to take charge of his well-being. As Dermody was allowing his connection with Young to wane, Gilbert Austin, a clergyman who kept a school of some repute in Dublin, called at Owenson’s home, and was introduced to Dermody. Austin and his wife were initially keen to show off their prodigious discovery:

Mrs. Austen [sic], a leading woman of fashion, frequently summoned him to her assemblies, where he wrote verses à commandment and recited them with grace. The boy-poet was introduced, like the young Roscius of the day, to all the literary and fashionable society during the Dublin season; but his home was in the old Music Hall, and in the simple country house of Drumcondra.⁵²

Owenson and Austin planned together that Dermody’s studies should be completed at Austin’s academy. Austin selected, printed and sought subscriptions for a small collection of Dermody’s poems when the poet was twelve years of age. Subscribers included Lady Charlemont, Lady Gore, Lady Crofton, the duke of Leinster, and Lord Caulfield, later earl of Charlemont. This collection was the 1789 *Poems*, expressly printed for a small group of people who ‘might take an interest in the protection of our young poet’:

50 Sydney Owenson, *Lady Morgan’s Memoirs: Autobiography, Diaries and Correspondence*, 2 vols (1863, London, 1868), 88. Henceforth referenced as LMM.

51 Young, originally from County Roscommon, became a fellow of Trinity College in 1775, and was elected professor of philosophy in 1786. He was engaged in theological and literary matters, but his primary intellectual concern was with Newtonian science.

52 LMM, vol. 1, 89.

The following little Collection of Poems, it is hoped, will meet the kind indulgence of the Reader. They are published with a view to obtain support and protection for young genius. —The Author has not yet attained his fourteenth year. —At this early age, he has been sent abroad into the world without friends, and furnished with no means of livelihood, except such as he might derive from a little classical knowledge, and from his talent for Poetry. But these endowments are of little current value, especially in infancy, and require time and cultivation to bring them to maturity. —Our young Poet, therefore, as might be expected, has suffered every kind of distress to which his unprotected situation was liable ... It is but justice, however, to the benevolence of Mr Owenson, of the Theatre Royal, to mention, that he rescued our Author from the lowest indigence, and received him into his own house. So that to him he is primarily obliged for the comforts he now enjoys, and for the happy prospects that now open to him. —He has had the honour to be presented to some of the first Characters in this city in rank and letters, whose liberal assistance and countenance will, no doubt, have weight as an example, and obtain for him a very general patronage among persons of discernment and distinction.

The advertisement to this collection also stressed that some of the poems might seem derivative, but that the reader should

be inclined rather to approve of them, as they shew a just attention to the best models. —Should many of the original passages or thoughts appear above the years of the Author, the Reader may be assured they are entirely his own. —And he will readily make allowance for a few errors, and weak lines, as our young Poet writes with singular rapidity, and as corrections have been avoided, in order to present a genuine specimen of his abilities. —In the selection here offered from a great number, the best of his little productions, as may be supposed, have been preferred; but some are retained to shew the variety of his manner, and some on account of the grateful sentiments they contain to his benefactors.⁵³

The special pleading of the advertisement threatens to undo the collection. But it was right to lower the reader's expectations. The implicit acknowledgement is that there is a novelty value to Dermody, a dishevelled charm that offsets the conventional and derivative in his poetry, and an impoverished background that might disarm the more churlish of the intended upper-class readership. There is an appeal, too, to the more adventurous potential patron, for Dermody is a risky proposition; hence the plea for his 'protection'.

Dermody frequently wrote pieces specifically for those who had assisted him, or those who might assist him again in the future. These have a certain suavity of tone; Dermody's gift for the imitation of Augustan models was regularly deployed for short-term gain

53 *Poems* (Dublin, 1789), iii–v.