

## Mallow's Monumental Mystery

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At the bottom of O'Brien St., you'll come across a beautiful traffic hazard. Ask anyone, tourist or citizen, who the monument commemorates and they'll probably tell you William O'Brien. After all, it is his street. But the memorial is actually there to honour a man called J. J. Fitzgerald.

'Who is this Fitzgerald fellow?' you may ask. 'Why is he so special?' 'Why is his statue in O'Brien St.?' Well, I'm now going to tell you. I'm also going to tell you about William O'Brien himself. When you finish reading, you can decide for yourself whether O'Brien deserves his own monument or whether Fitzgerald deserves his own street.

We'll start with O'Brien. William O'Brien was born on the 2nd of October 1852 at Bank Place, Mallow. After his father's death, he supported his family through journalism, writing for the *Cork Daily Herald* and the *Freeman's Journal*. However, it was not until meeting Charles Stewart Parnell at a Home Rule meeting in Tralee that he became interested in national politics.

At Parnell's request, he became editor of the Land League journal, the *United Irishman*. He was later imprisoned in Kilmainham jail in 1881 for writing 'seditious' articles. While in prison, he was elected MP for Mallow. In 1886, he went to America to rally support for the Irish cause. In 1887, he organised a 'no-rent' strike on Kingston estate, near Mitchelstown. His attempted arrest led to the 'Mitchelstown Massacre'. Late in 1890, while in prison, he wrote *When We Were Boys*, a romance set in the Fenian days of 1860. In 1891 the Irish Parliamentary Party, headed by Parnell, was split by Parnell's divorce scandal. O'Brien, who was in America, pledged his support to the anti-Parnell faction.

In 1898 O'Brien wrote another book, *A Queen of Men*, about Grace Malley. Also in 1898, in response to famine in Mayo, he founded the United Irish League. The League was a tenant organisation attempting to make landlords sell tenants their land. He organised the Irish Land Conference in 1902. This led to the Wyndham Land Purchase Act, which sounded the end of landlordism and allowed Irish farmers to finally control their own land.

O'Brien had been an MP since 1881, but did not contest the 1918 General Election due to Sinn Féin's popularity. He opposed the creation of the Irish Free State in 1921 because of partition, and declined nomination for Senator. He died on the 25th of February 1928 and was buried in Mallow.

Now for Fitzgerald. John Joseph Fitzgerald was born on the 18th of February 1872 at Shortcastle, Mallow. He received his early education at the Patrician Academy, where he would later teach. He quickly became interested in patriotic movements and became secretary of the local branch of the United Irish League. However, he became associated mostly with the Irish Land and Labour Association, who were attempting to organise tenant farmers and agricultural labourers. The Association demanded houses and land for its members, education for the young and pensions for the old. Fitzgerald's efforts in the Association were greatly appreciated, resulting

in his appointment to the Association's Central Council. Fitzgerald also managed to reduce friction between farmers and labourers, which benefited him in elections.

Fitzgerald played an active role in establishing an Urban District Council. He became the first chairman of the U.D.C. and initiated the building of Davis Terrace. He was elected to Cork County Council in 1902. He devoted much of his time to helping the poor, casting aside all other matters to assist them.

His death, aged 34, on the 6th of April 1906 caused a profound shock throughout Mallow. It was decided to erect a monument in memory of this aspiring young politician who had done so much for his town. On Sunday, the 13th of October 1907, William O'Brien unveiled the Fitzgerald monument at the end of the street that would one day bear his name. He said 'Ireland has not in our time lost a more able or unselfish young patriot'.

So, who was better? Is the man who helped Mallow more deserving of our recognition over the man who helped Ireland? Should the man who spent his life trying to improve Irish affairs be remembered more fondly than the man who never had the opportunity to do so? Or should we allow them to co-exist on the same street, never forgetting the improvements they both made to our lives? I think we know the answer.