

THE RADICAL ARCHIVIST

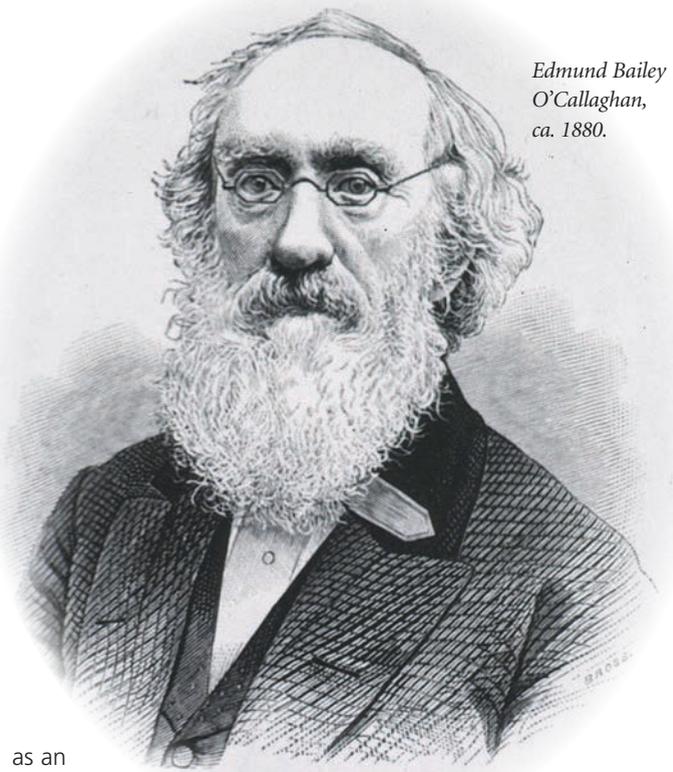
BY STEPHEN McERLEANE

From agitator to historian: the work of Edmund Bailey O'Callaghan—child of Ireland, political organizer in Canada, and finally a New Yorker—gave the state its earliest history as a Dutch colony.

In early November 1837, the province of Lower Canada was on the verge of rebellion. Tensions between the Patriote Party, the dominant power in the Legislative Assembly, and the colony's British administrators had reached the point of open insurrection. The Patriotes demanded a representative form of government that largely emulated the populist, anti-monopoly ideas of American Jacksonian democracy. Their demands included popular election of the members of the Legislative Council, who were appointed by the governor general, and a broad reduction in the powers of British administrators. As the masthead to *The Vindicator*—the leading

English-language voice of the largely Francophone party—demanded, "JUSTICE TO ALL CLASSES; MONOPOLIES AND PRIVILEGES TO NONE."

The disorder in the streets of Montreal on November 6 spelled the end for *The Vindicator* when an angry mob of Tory supporters ransacked and destroyed its office and Edmund O'Callaghan, its editor, went into hiding. An Irish immigrant, physician, and dedicated member of the Patriote party, O'Callaghan had been the newspaper's editor for five years. Foremost in his mind as he fled must have been his personal safety and future preparations for the Patriote cause. What he could not have foreseen was his future career in New York



Edmund Bailey O'Callaghan, ca. 1880.

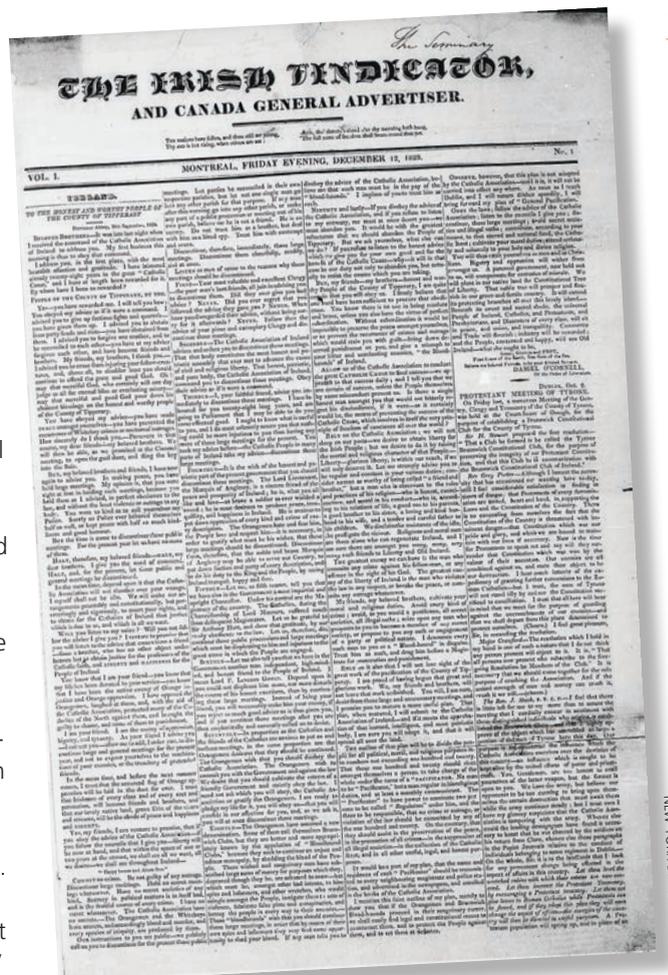
as an influential historian, archivist, translator, and documentary editor.

Populist in the Making

O'Callaghan was born around 1800 in Mallow, a small market town in County Cork, Ireland. He and his five siblings lived in "comfortable circumstances" above his father's dry goods store, a business from which

Owen O'Callaghan earned enough

money to provide his children with a good education. We can surmise that the anti-English, pro-Catholic ideology to which he was exposed in his youth played a role in shaping O'Callaghan's own political sensibilities and informed the trajectory of his adulthood. Around the age



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of twenty he left Ireland to attend the Paris School of Medicine, which was shut down two years later for its purported political radicalism. After a brief return to Ireland, he headed to North America, where he spent the remainder of his life.

In 1823 O'Callaghan arrived in Lower Canada. Named for its position on the St. Lawrence River, Lower Canada was created in 1791 from a division of the Province of Quebec into Upper and Lower Canada. It is unclear what led O'Callaghan there, but his first decade was largely spent providing medical care for the indigent, mostly Irish immigrant population of Montreal and Quebec City.

O'Callaghan biographer Jack Verney surmised that a sense of Christian obligation drove O'Callaghan's work with the poor in these early years. In the late 1820s, however, O'Callaghan became a "nascent Jacksonian"; years later he would speak of the seventh American president in glowing terms, "a man of great mind—of strong will and of the purest honesty, loving the Masses and hating all Banks and Monopolies." This newfound belief in the democratic ideal that government should work for all people regardless of class or station led him toward political measures as a means to alleviate social ills.

Over the next few years, O'Callaghan became increasingly involved in what could be called populist political

causes. He also found his voice as a writer and political firebrand. In 1828, *The Irish Vindicator* hired O'Callaghan as its Quebec correspondent. Established by supporters of Irish politician Daniel O'Connell and his fight for the rights of Catholics in Great Britain, the newspaper eventually addressed broader issues and emerged as the leading English-language voice of the Patriote Party. It then became known as simply *The Vindicator*.

O'Callaghan quickly established himself as a strong Irish voice in Lower Canada, his acerbic pen disdainful of the colony's British administrators. He became the paper's editor in April 1833. "Our rights must not be violated with impunity," he wrote in 1835. "A howl of indignation must be raised from one extremity of the Province to the other, against the Robbers, and against all those who partake of the plunder. Henceforth, there must be no peace in the province, no quarter for the plunderers. Agitate! Agitate!!



Louis-Joseph Papineau, 1865.

Agitate!!!" In 1834, as tensions between the Patriotes and the Tories rose, O'Callaghan was elected to Lower Canada's Legislative Assembly. As a well-respected Patriote Party member, he subsequently served as the lieutenant for its leader, Louis-Joseph Papineau.

Exile

The political situation spiraled out of control in November 1837 as calls for constitutional reform gave way to demands for an independent Lower Canada. Amid the disorder in Montreal, O'Callaghan and his compatriots came under attack. On November 13, O'Callaghan fled Montreal with Papineau. They eventually made their way to Albany, New York in December with rewards for their capture set at

The Irish Vindicator, the leading English-language voice of the Patriote party, hired O'Callaghan as its Quebec correspondent in 1828.



Louis-Joseph Papineau addresses a crowd of Patriotes in 1837.

After being disappointed by the lack of support from his fellow Democrats, O'Callaghan turned to an unlikely political partner, Thurlow Weed, an Albany Whig and lifelong friend.



Thurlow Weed, a lifelong friend of O'Callaghan.

£500 and £1,000 respectively by Lower Canada's British administrators.

Upon his arrival in Albany, O'Callaghan put his mind to doing what he could for the Patriote cause while looking for gainful employment. He considered starting his own newspaper or purchasing an existing one, but instead went to New York City to raise money for a planned Patriote invasion of Lower Canada. He returned to Albany in January 1838 disappointed; though he had been received with great enthusiasm, donations were sparse. Americans were apparently indifferent to Canadian affairs. "In regards to the friends in N. York and Albany about which you inquire," he wrote to William Lyon Mackenzie, a confidant and Upper Canada counterpart in the 1837 rebellion, "I write to say that the proverb of 'great cry and little wool' has been verified in both these cities."

A force of Patriotes gathered near the Canadian border and launched an invasion of Lower Canada in February 1838; British troops easily repulsed the Patriote forces, which were already weakened by mass desertions. O'Callaghan was despondent.

In a letter to Albany industrialist Erastus Corning, who had earlier agreed to supply materials for the invasion, he confessed that he "never expected that [the rebels] would have returned to the States so very soon as they have done. The news which arrived on Sunday night surprized [sic] & disappointed me not a little." In November the rebels tried again, only to be beaten back once more.

After several years of practicing medicine sporadically in Albany and New York City, O'Callaghan returned to journalism as a writer for the Albany journal *The Northern Light* in 1841. It was this position that set him on a different career path. Likely motivated by his ideological sensibilities, he began to look into sources for a proposed article on the anti-rent rebellion on nearby Van Rensselaer Manor. The manor extended back to the seventeenth-century Dutch colony of New Netherland and preserved a system of land tenure that many considered archaic and feudal. Historian John Gilmary Shea, a frequent correspondent of O'Callaghan's, claimed that once O'Callaghan discovered that the legal documents relating to the land in question

were in Dutch, he began to uncover the copious surviving records from the Dutch colony. "Astonished at the vast amount of historical information" that had been withheld from readers of English, O'Callaghan began to study Dutch in earnest.

O'Callaghan's discovery of these documents aroused an intense interest in the early history of New York and pulled several of his interests into one pursuit. It spoke to issues of colonization, with which he was intimately familiar, and revealed that the State of New York had a past that had not been dominated by the rule of the English, whom he resented deeply. He soon left his career in medicine to devote most of his energy toward scholarly pursuits. At the end of 1845, he published the first volume of his two-volume *History of New Netherland, or, New York Under the Dutch*, the first full-length scholarly history of the Dutch colony.

The Making of an Archivist

To continue these scholarly pursuits, O'Callaghan needed a position that would give him ample time to research and write. After being disappointed by the lack of support



O'Callaghan fled Lower Canada as battles broke out between the British and the Patriotes. but the passions that had endeared him to his Patriote allies were brought to bear on his historical work in New York.

from his fellow Democrats, O'Callaghan turned to an unlikely political partner, Thurlow Weed, an Albany Whig and lifelong friend. Weed got O'Callaghan a job at the Brooklyn Navy Yard that gave him plenty of free time to pursue his studies. This allowed him to finish the second volume of *History of New Netherland*, published in 1848. It was also around this time that the City of New York hired him to translate several volumes of the records of New Amsterdam, present-day New York City.

O'Callaghan's big break came in the spring of 1848, when the State of New York hired him to edit and translate what would become the widely cited four-volume set, *Documentary History of the State of New York*. These volumes comprised a selection of transcriptions from European archives that had been completed by historian John Romeyn Brodhead years earlier. The state subsequently decided to publish the documents in their entirety, again edited and translated by O'Callaghan, in the ten-volume set *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York*, which is still in use by scholars today.

Now comfortably employed by the state, O'Callaghan began work on a calendar,

or descriptive list, of the administrative records of New Netherland in the state's possession. The records were originally bound in books and arranged alphabetically, but in the absence of the standard of keeping documents in their original order, to which archivists adhere today, O'Callaghan decided to rearrange them by genre and date. Unfortunately his disruption of the original order destroyed the context in which the records were created and maintained, information that can be crucial to our understanding of them. His arrangement of these records remains to this day.

After completing the calendar, O'Callaghan went on to translate four manuscript volumes of the administrative records between 1869 and 1872. While his translations contain their share of mistakes, the early twentieth-century translator of many of the same documents, A.J.F. van Laer, concluded that the translations were "a vast improvement" on the work of Francis Adrian Vander Kemp, an earlier translator whose efforts Van Laer deemed "absolutely worthless for critical historical work." New Netherland Research Center Associate Director Janny Venema, a translator of New York's early

Dutch documents for some thirty years, is keenly impressed by O'Callaghan's understanding of seventeenth-century Dutch. As Venema notes, O'Callaghan's work is all the more impressive when one considers that nineteenth-century translators had access to only a fraction of the reference material available to translators today.

A Legacy for the State

O'Callaghan spent the last years of his life in New York City, where he died in 1880 from injuries he sustained when he was hit by a streetcar in 1877. He is still remembered in Canada for his role in the Rebellions of 1837, and in the United States for his work as a historian, archivist, translator, and documentary editor. These seemingly incompatible halves are made whole through consideration of his life's experiences. The printed word—his weapon of choice in the political battles in Lower Canada—dominated his American life, from which the legacy of colonialism was never far. And the passions that endeared him to his Patriote allies were brought to bear on his historical work in New York, where he labored to decipher the documentary evidence of its earliest history of European colonization. ■

THE ARCHIVES CONNECTION

Manuscripts and Special Collections at the New York State Library holds many of O'Callaghan's manuscript translations. Although many burned in the Capitol Fire of 1911, some survive in a fragile condition. His translation of Volume 1 of the Dutch administrative records in the New York State Archives, later revised by A.J.F. van Laer, is the only record we have of most of those pages, as the volume was destroyed in the 1911 fire. The Albany Institute of History & Art holds O'Callaghan's letter to Erastus Corning. Other correspondence and personal papers are held by the Library of Congress.

Much biographical information for this article was taken from Jack Verney's *O'Callaghan: The Making and Unmaking of a Rebel* (1994). The only other full-length work on O'Callaghan is Francis Shaw Guy's dissertation at the Catholic University of America, *Edmund Bailey O'Callaghan: A Study in American Historiography* (1934).

Many transcriptions and translations of colonial Dutch documents are available on the website of the New Netherland Institute, www.newnetherlandinstitute.org.