



The painter and the poet: Michael George Brennan (1839-1871) and Laura Catherine Redden (1839-1923)

BRENDAN ROONEY

MICHAEL GEORGE BRENNAN'S PREMATURE DEATH IN ALGIERS IN 1871 BROUGHT TO AN end an unorthodox and remarkable career. Relatively few of his paintings are known, but enough to reveal that he was an artist of considerable talent and promise. Laura Catherine Redden's engagement to Brennan has been known to scholars of American poetry and journalism for some time, but Redden's archives have not before been examined in detail for what they can tell us of her erstwhile fiancé.¹ In fact, her poetry and personal correspondence add colour, romance and drama to what little has been known to date of the final years of Brennan's life, and provide a fascinating insight into the social and professional circles in which he mixed.

Brennan was, perhaps, destined to live a life less ordinary. He was born in Castlebar in 1839 to Thomas Brennan and his wife Bridget McDonnell.² While Thomas, the owner of a hardware shop and an inventor, was celebrated locally as something of a genius,³ Michael's youngest brother Louis (1852-1932), no doubt inspired by his father, became one of the most respected engineers of his generation, designing, among other innovations, a gyroscopic helicopter and monorail, and the eponymous 'Brennan torpedo', deployed throughout the world but never fired in conflict.⁴ Another brother, Pat, had earlier emigrated to Melbourne in 1856 to take up a teaching post.

Michael excelled at school in Castlebar, and having devised his own form of shorthand,⁵ submitted articles on politics and legal cases to local newspapers, including the *Connaught Telegraph*,⁶ as well as papers in Dublin.⁷ He also showed a precocious artistic talent, impressing his schoolmates with caricatures of local characters and earning the

1 – Michael George Brennan, *IN THE CHURCH OF SAN COSTANZO, CAPRI* (detail)
1866, oil on canvas, 74 x 60 (© National Gallery of Ireland [cat. no. 155])

admiration of Charles O'Donel, later a magistrate in Dublin, and Lady Louisa Tenison, Countess of Kingston, who was to become his lifelong friend and confidante. With the support of those two figures, Michael enrolled as a teenager at the Dublin Society Schools before moving to London, where he began producing frontispieces and cartoons for the satirical publication *Fun*.

Brennan's rapid professional ascent was, however, abruptly curtailed when he developed tuberculosis and was forced to return to Ireland, where he convalesced at Kilronan Castle, the county Roscommon residence of Lady Kingston. He remained in Ireland following the emigration of his parents and brother Louis to Australia in 1861,⁸ but became so consumptive that he was advised to move abroad to avail of the perceived benefits of a milder climate.

He removed to Rome in about 1863 (Plate 2), where he shared a studio with a George Symonds and the accomplished Scottish artist Keeley Halswelle (1832-1891), who had also worked as an illustrator (for the *Illustrated London News* and the Edinburgh publisher Nelson). While in Rome, Brennan also came into contact with the painters John Rogers Herbert (1810-1890) and Fred Taylor, with whom he appeared sketching on a street in a watercolour by Halswelle.⁹

From Rome Brennan moved south to Capri, and there produced several works of exceptional quality. Pictures like *A Vine Pergola at Capri* (1866, NGI) (Plate 3) and *Courtyard in Capri* (private collection) are evidence not just of Brennan's familiarity with and affection for his surroundings, but also of his awareness of current trends in European art. By the second half of the nineteenth century, the island had become a relatively popular retreat among an increasingly peripatetic European artistic community. Several artists from Britain and Ireland were drawn to Capri's warm climate and picturesque subjects. Frederick Leighton, who, arriving there in 1859, was among the first, was followed by, among others, John Brett, who was there at the same time as Brennan, and John Singer Sargent, who painted there in 1878. Brennan's compatriot Helen Mabel





Michael George Brennan
(1839-1871)

3 – *A VINE PERGOLA AT CAPRI*
1866, oil on canvas, 56 x 75 cm
(© National Gallery of Ireland
[cat. no. 153])

4 – *IN THE CHURCH OF SAN
COSTANZO, CAPRI*
1866, oil on canvas, 74 x 60
(© National Gallery of Ireland
[cat. no. 155])

opposite

2 – *SELF-PORTRAIT SKETCHING IN
ROME, APRIL 1863*
1863, pen & ink on paper, 10 x 18 cm



Trevor stayed in the village of Ana Capri in 1891, which she remembered fondly in her memoirs, *The Ramblings of an Artist*.¹⁰ Brennan appears to have had a similarly positive experience there, and his known works of that period record a world glowing with Mediterranean heat and supporting a healthy, social community. In his pictorially complex view of the interior of the Church of San Costanzo (1866, NGI) (Plates 1, 4),¹¹ Brennan recorded the piety of the local population in the same manner as many of his Irish contemporaries did in Brittany.¹² Respite from the searing summer heat in one of the island's oldest churches also provided an opportunity for prayer, and Brennan's painting records in more intimate surroundings the same religiosity that he had celebrated in his monumental *Preaching in the Coliseum – Friday* (private collection) (Plate 5).¹³ He may even have felt an affinity with such subjects based on his upbringing in rural Ireland. The choice of subjects, like *Kissing the Padre's Hand* and *Via della vita* (a scene from the funeral of a young girl), might be said to be consistent with Brennan's alleged decision to cease working for the above-mentioned periodical *Fun* in London rather than lampoon Pope Pius IX, who was, at that time, in conflict with the Italian liberation movement.¹⁴ In any case, Brennan seems to have worked to his strengths. Years before, Lady Kingston, a keen watercolourist herself, had apparently admired the 'technical mastery of so young an artist, whose sketches of street-scenes, market-women and dark haired-children reminded her of Murillo's gamins'.¹⁵ Brennan's *The Drum Beater* (Hamburger

5 – Michael George Brennan, *PREACHING IN THE COLISEUM – FRIDAY, 1864*

(reproduced in Máirín Allen, 'The Boy from Castlebar: Michael George Brennan, Painter, 1839-1871', *THE CAPUCHIN ANNUAL* (1945-46). Original painting unavailable.)





6 – Michael George Brennan, *THE DRUM BEATER*
1867, oil on canvas, 56 x 70 cm (© Hamburger Kunsthalle)

Kunsthalle) (Plate 6) exemplifies such qualities.

It was on Capri, in 1867, that Brennan also encountered Laura Catherine Redden, a poet, journalist and author, of precisely the same age (Plate 7).¹⁶ Redden shared Brennan's prodigious talent for writing, and had published in *Harper's Magazine* while still a student at the Missouri School for the Deaf. She wrote from 1860 onwards under the *nom de plume* Howard Glyndon, and despite efforts by the *St Louis Missouri State Journal* (a rival to the *St Louis Missouri Republican*, for which she wrote) to publicise her identity, few among her admiring readership were aware that she was either a woman or deaf.¹⁷ Her first book, *Notable Men in the House* (1862), which profiled members of the United States Congress, reflected the keen interest in politics that would see her posted to Europe toward the end of the American Civil War as foreign correspondent for several New York newspapers.¹⁸

According to Redden herself, she and Brennan were engaged within just ten days of meeting. Her account of events reflected her spirited nature and the unusual circumstances in which their relationship developed:



7 – *Laura Catherine Redden*,
c.1860

(courtesy *Western Historical
Manuscript Collection, University of
Missouri, Columbia, MO*)

On the 23rd of August 1867 I became engaged to Michele G. Brennan a young Irish Artist – whom I had not known over ten days before if so much – On this subject my heart is too full to speak – Miss More, who went to Capri with me, on the engagement being announced, returned with us to Sorrento. I settled up my affairs there, and we returned to Capri where I spent nearly 4 happy months in the Villa Quisisana¹⁹ Michele and I seeing each other twice a day without ever missing a day, except one day when he was sick in the evening then I only saw him once – All of a sudden this was interfered with – I had a disagreement with Miss Clarke wife of the Proprietor of the Villa. There was no other hotel on Capri which would have been comfortable and so I came over here, Michele escorting me and that is 5 days ago. He went back the next day, and is to return as soon as his affairs are arranged in Capri – that may be two weeks, and it may be 3. I have not had a letter since he left, tho' it is 4 days and I am getting very uneasy about him. As it is, I am very pleasantly situated here in the Hotel Cucumella [sic]²⁰ God be thanked...²¹

Such impulsive behaviour was not entirely alien to Redden. She had been engaged three times already (twice to the same Presbyterian minister), though she later described Brennan as the love of her life.²²

Redden and Brennan's liaison did not go unnoticed, but rather provided fodder for the social pages of at least two newspapers. A cutting from an unidentified Anglophone newspaper in Rome, which survived among Redden's effects, declared

'this time ... it is an English gentleman and an American lady who have been hit and hit hard, too, both are well known to fame; one has plied the pen with great success, and ranks high in the American literary world; the other has a high standing as an artist, and his paintings have been greatly admired at the Exhibitions of the British Royal Academy ... It seems nothing but right that poetry and painting should join hands and hearts together, and we feel certain the admirers of works of both will unite with us in wishing them every success'.²³

It seems that Brennan too was acutely aware of the union of arts that his association with Redden represented. A portrait by Brennan that has recently come to light features a young model (almost certainly Redden) in the artist's studio, contemplating an unfinished painting on an easel (Plate 8).²⁴ Wrapping a coat around her to warm herself between sittings, and surrounded by familiar studio props and artist's accoutrements, she takes her place as an active participant in Brennan's creative endeavour.²⁵ Indeed, if the subject of the pic-



8 – Michael George Brennan, *Portrait of a Lady in the Artist's Studio* (Laura Catherine Redden)
1867, oil on canvas, 62 x 44 cm

ture on the easel is the *Muses on Mount Helicon*, Brennan might even be said to be casting her here in an inspirational role. Certainly, the painting seems quite different compositionally from those Italian works for which Brennan is known.

Optimism concerning Brennan and Redden's relationship proved somewhat misplaced, however. Though the couple discussed arrangements for the wedding, Redden appears to have reneged on her agreement to marry. Leaving her trunk in Italy, she returned to the United States to publish a backlog of writing and to study new methodologies in lip-reading. Over the following two years, she published a translation of *Le Petit Garçon*, enrolled at the Clark Institute for Deaf Mutes in Massachusetts, and wrote for the *New York Evening Mail*.²⁶ By May 1871 she was making arrangements to have her possessions transported back from Italy to the United States.²⁷ She and Brennan were never to see each other again. In the meantime, Brennan's health had begun to deteriorate. He left Capri in 1870 for Algiers, where he once again came under the care of Lady Kingston. On 2nd July 1871 he fell while dressing and haemorrhaged. He died a few weeks later, on 27th July, and was buried in Algiers.

Responsibility for informing Redden of Brennan's death fell to another significant friend, the photographer and dealer Robert Macpherson (1811-1872).²⁸ Macpherson, who had for many years 'dominated the English artistic colony that hovered in the area around the Spanish steps',²⁹ had heard the news directly from Lady Kingston's husband in Ireland, and the tone of his letter suggests that he was either deeply distrustful of Redden's position in Brennan's life or that he underestimated their closeness. He claimed, for example, that the artist had told him previously that he had not touched a brush since he left Rome, though two dated and inscribed watercolour studies of Algerian figures that were in Lady Kingston's collection and only recently came to light demonstrate that this was not altogether true (Plates 9, 10). More pointedly, he informed Redden that Brennan had appointed Lady Kingston, from whom he had received 'every comfort + kindness that could be desired', sole executor of his will, though he did concede that Brennan had little to leave but some sketches.³⁰

A distressed Redden replied by return to Macpherson asking for his memories of the artist. Macpherson obliged, though his lengthy missal was notably abrupt in tone. Brennan's effects, he told Redden with thinly veiled suspicion, had 'gone into the hands of a woman and a thorough lady not by title alone but one who is noble minded and will feel for you as one real woman can feel for another'.³¹ Promising to pass Redden's contact details on to Lady Kingston lest the former feel any 'awkwardness', Macpherson added that Brennan 'rarely spoke even to me about his engagement to you after some misunderstanding you had had in correspondence for some time', and, despite the artist's hopes that all would be well, he had said 'with a sigh that he feared the affair was ended'.³² Macpherson elaborated:

It was generally known that [Brennan] was engaged to a lady he had met in Capri, but no one ever knew her name except myself, and I have been discreet in keep-



9 – Michael George Brennan
ALGERIAN MAN SEATED
1871, watercolour on paper, 16 x 10 cm



10 – Michael George Brennan
ALGERIAN MAN DRINKING COFFEE
1871, watercolour on paper, 16 x 10 cm

ing it secret till I should know how things should go, and I am not now likely to be less discreet, seeing that death has sealed your fates as man + wife.³³

With this correspondence, Macpherson enclosed the last letter he had received from Brennan and a photograph of the artist, stipulating that Redden should copy the former and return the latter. He also said that he would pass Redden's details on to Charlie Dix, an American marine artist, and his wife, Macpherson's sister-in-law, who in Italy had been 'very intimate with Brennan + liked him'.³⁴ It seems that that meeting never took place, however, as Dix died on the Continent in March 1873.

In November 1871 Lady Kingston wrote personally to Redden from Kilronan Castle to say that Brennan had instructed her niece, who had cared for him in Algiers, to burn all of his letters with the exception of two, which he deposited carefully in his writing case with his money. Only these and a couple of loose sheets, including two other letters from his mother, survived.³⁵ Lady Kingston's letter reveals the sadness of a loyal friend and champion: 'Poor Brennan! His early death was a severe trial to me. Watching him as I have done from his youth + to see him cut off just as he was about to realise all his dreams of winning a great name is indeed sad.'³⁶

Evidently kept at a distance by Brennan's friends, Redden mourned his loss in her writing, penning a number of poems to his memory. Stanzas from one of these, *With White Hands*, reveal not just the depth of her grief, but feelings of remorse and regret for what might have been:

...All the time there was a grave
 'Neath the warm Italian sky,
 By the Adriatic's wave:
 She alone, of all, knew why.

He whose dust lay lonely there,
 Far from friends and native land.
 Worked to win a name to wear
 Till she let him kiss her hand.

Love and longing, pain and pride,
 Passion first, and coldness next:
 When she went away, he died,
 Being frail, intense and vexed.

But the snow above her heart
 Melted suddenly one day,
 And, awakening with a start,
 She wrote, 'Oh, forgive, I pray,

'All my coldness, all my pride,
 I, unwillingly, am true.
 When my lips said "No!" I lied:
 I have never loved but you!'

Two of the final stanzas are particularly revealing:

Well it may be that some day,
 When I'm wrinkled, bent, and old,
 When my hair is thin and gray,
 None will think but I am cold.

... But the while she bent her head
 In the waltz's rapturous wave,
 She was thinking, 'He is dead!'
 And 'What flowers grow on his grave?'

In America, Redden continued to write articles and poems for the *New York Evening Mail* and for magazines such as *Harper's*, *Putnam's* and the *Silent Worker*. *Sounds from Secret Chambers*, which proved to be Redden's most popular book, was published in 1873.

Three years later she married the well-known New York lawyer Edward Searing. In 1881 the couple separated, leaving Redden to provide for herself and her one-year-old daughter Elsa. She moved to California in 1886, where she received a number of poetry commissions. She published her last book, *Of El Dorado*, in 1897 and, having spent her final years with her daughter's family, died on 10th August 1923.

Brennan enjoyed a shorter but similarly distinguished career, exhibiting at the royal academies in Dublin, London and Edinburgh.³⁷ Robert Macpherson wrote to Redden that Brennan's painting *The Acolyte* was so well received at the Royal Academy in London that two academicians, his friend John Rogers Herbert and Alfred Elmore (1815-1881) fought 'as to who should have the picture'.³⁸ As a member of the hanging committee, Elmore secured it, as well as *Il Barbière*, Brennan's other picture at the exhibition. Elmore paid £300 for *The Acolyte*, though Macpherson believed Brennan could have charged more had he been 'less modest'.³⁹

The above-mentioned Keeley Halswelle had heard of Brennan's illness in Venice in June 1871, expressing concern in his diary.⁴⁰ He had evidently admired Brennan's talent, and bought, in 1872, a picture that Brennan had left unfinished at his death. Halswelle recorded that in Rome in April 1874 he finished *Incident in a Country Church, Italy*, the subject of which he had 'given' to Brennan having witnessed it 'one Sunday in the church at Frascati'.⁴¹ He claimed that though Brennan had merely painted in a few of the figures and left 'the story untold', he had endeavoured to 'finish the picture ... as far as possible in [Brennan's] own style'.⁴² In May Halswelle sold the painting, along with some forty-nine sketches of Venice, to Agnew's.⁴³ However, the following month he executed a small replica of the painting, which he submitted to the Royal Scottish Academy in 1876. The picture won praise from *The Scotsman* newspaper, but also aroused the belated suspicions of the RSA council on the grounds that Halswelle had not made clear Brennan's connection with the conception and creation of the work.⁴⁴ Its members relented, albeit reservedly, only after protracted correspondence and the forthright protestations of Halswelle's agent, T. Scott, and the artist himself.⁴⁵

Brennan's pictures provide little evidence of the arduous toil and straitened circumstances of local rural or urban communities among whom he had lived, or indeed the hardships he himself endured. One might argue that his 'subdued realism' did not allow for such gravitas, but was rather better suited to the romanticism to which, on the evidence of his ill-fated liaison with Redden, he was temperamentally predisposed.⁴⁶ He appears to have been a passionate individual, whose decision to subtitle his painting *Behind the Time* with the Italian proverb '*chi va piano va sano*' (who goes slowly, goes healthily) seems particularly poignant.

ENDNOTES

The following abbreviation is used:

UM, LCRS Papers University of Missouri-Columbia, Western Historical Manuscripts Collection,
 Laura Redden Searing Papers, 1846-1963

- ¹ The author is very grateful to Judy Yaeger Jones for drawing his attention and providing access to this material, and to the staff of the Western Historical Manuscripts Collection, University of Missouri-Columbia, in which the letters are deposited.
- ² He was born on 28th September 1839 on Market Street (now Main Street). Máirín Allen, 'The Boy from Castlebar – Michael George Brennan, Painter, 1839-1871', *Capuchin Annual*, 1945-46, 132.
- ³ Thomas's achievements were understood to have included building a mechanical figure and being the first person in Castlebar to develop photographs. Allen, 'The Boy from Castlebar', 131.
- ⁴ There were four so-called Brennan Stations in Ireland and Britain. For further information on Louis, see Norman Tomlinson, *Louis Brennan, Inventor Extraordinaire* (Chatham, 1980).
- ⁵ Allen, 'The Boy from Castlebar', 133.
- ⁶ Liam Egan, 'Louis Brennan, Castlebar's Greatest Son', *Castlebar Parish Magazine*, Christmas 1981, 21.
- ⁷ Walter Strickland, *A Dictionary of Irish Artists*, 2 vols (Dublin 1913) I, 82-83.
- ⁸ Another brother, Joe, had meanwhile emigrated to the United States. Allen, 'The Boy from Castlebar', 135.
- ⁹ See Sotheby's, Billingshurst, 22nd May 1996, lot 214.
- ¹⁰ Helen Mabel Trevor, *The Ramblings of an Artist* (1901) 57-63. Trevor provided a description of a *masseria*, or farmhouse, very much like the one that features in Brennan's *A Vine Pergola at Capri*.
- ¹¹ This work (NGI 155) has been known to date simply as *Interior of a Church*.
- ¹² The juxtaposition of youth and old age as a means of communicating the importance of tradition to local communities was also a leitmotif in naturalist painting of the period. See, for example, works by Aloysius O'Kelly, William Gerard Barry and Nathaniel Hill.
- ¹³ The author is grateful to Ruth Sheehy for information regarding this painting.
- ¹⁴ Strickland, *Dictionary*, 83.
- ¹⁵ Allen, 'The Boy from Castlebar', 133.
- ¹⁶ Brennan did return periodically to Ireland and England.
- ¹⁷ Judy Yaeger Jones, 'Some Private Advice on Publishers: Correspondence between Laura C. Redden and Samuel L. Clemens', *Missouri Historical Review*, 93, part 4, 1999, 389.
- ¹⁸ Redden also translated works in various languages into English.
- ¹⁹ Located in the heart of the town of Capri, the Villa Quisisana, which still functions as a hotel to this day, was built as a sanatorium by the Scottish doctor George Sidney Clarke in 1845.
- ²⁰ Redden must mean the Hotel Cocumella.
- ²¹ UM, LCRS Papers, C2290, folder 108, Italy diary.
- ²² Jones, 'Some Private Advice on Publishers', 390.
- ²³ UM, LCRS Papers, C2290, folder 93, Criticisms, Notices and Correspondence.
- ²⁴ The figure bears a strong resemblance to Redden as she appears in contemporary photos, and also displays what may be an engagement ring.
- ²⁵ The bust of Clytie on the floor in the background also features in W.H. Bartlett's detailed view of a sculptor's studio, *His Last Work* (NGI). The myth of Clytie and Helios seems rather apt for Brennan's painting, its themes of desertion and death prefiguring the fate of the poet and the painter. The author is very grateful to William Laffan for his analysis of this painting.

- ²⁶ Judy Yaeger Jones, 'A Brief Biography of Laura Redden Searing', in Judy Yaeger Jones and Jane E. Vallier (eds), *Sweet Bells Jangled – Laura Redden Searing: A Deaf Poet Restored* (Washington DC, 2003) 9.
- ²⁷ UM, LCRS Papers, C2290, folder 93, Criticisms, Notices and Correspondence, letter to Laura C. Redden from Howard M. Ticknor, US Vice Consul, Naples, 7th May 1871.
- ²⁸ Macpherson may have been particularly sensitive to Brennan's fate as he too had moved to Italy to improve his health. He had an interesting association with the National Gallery of Ireland, facilitating its acquisition in 1856 of sixteen paintings, many formerly the property of Cardinal Fesch, Napoleon's uncle, and shortly afterwards the addition to the collection of a further twenty-three pictures.
- ²⁹ Peter Somerville-Large, *The Story of the National Gallery of Ireland, 1854-2004* (Dublin, 2004) 78. Through the intervention of his wife's aunt Mrs Anna Brownell Jameson, the profligate and malarious MacPherson played a role in Lord Chancellor Maziere Brady's attempts to acquire for the incipient National Gallery of Ireland thirteen pictures from the collection of Signor Aducci in Rome in 1856.
- ³⁰ UM, LCRS Papers, C2290, folder 10, Correspondence 1870-71, letter from Robert Macpherson to Laura C. Redden, 10th August 1871.
- ³¹ *ibid.* Curiously, Brennan's portrait of Lady Kingston, which was shown posthumously at the Royal Academy in 1873, seems to be the only non-Italian subject by Brennan ever exhibited in Ireland or Britain, and one of few formal portraits. Lady Kingston owned Brennan's *Preaching in the Coliseum*, and lent it to the Dublin Exhibition of 1872.
- ³² *ibid.*
- ³³ *ibid.*
- ³⁴ Charles Temple Dix (1840-73), *ibid.*
- ³⁵ UM, LCRS Papers, C2290, folder 10, Correspondence 1870-71, letter from Lady Louisa Tenison to Laura C. Redden, 2nd November 1871. Lady Kingston offered to return any letters from Redden to her, or to destroy them if required.
- ³⁶ *ibid.* Lady Kingston is believed to have erected a 'noble column' at the artist's grave in Algiers.
- ³⁷ Brennan's address was listed in the accompanying catalogue as 'Caffe del Greco, Via Condotte [sic], Rome'.
- ³⁸ UM, LCRS Papers, C2290, folder 10, Correspondence 1870-71, letter from Robert Macpherson to Laura C. Redden, 26th September 1871.
- ³⁹ *ibid.*
- ⁴⁰ Keeley Halswelle, diary entry, 23rd June 1871 (in private possession). The author is very grateful to Michael Stewart for drawing his attention to this material.
- ⁴¹ Halswelle, diary entry, 16th April 1874. Halswelle also recorded that he had visited churches to 'see a bit of background for the "Church scene"', diary entry, 29th March 1874.
- ⁴² Halswelle, diary entry, 16th April 1874.
- ⁴³ Halswelle sold the picture, consigned by Agnews as *Church scene with child beside altar*, for the substantial sum of £400. The picture was sent to them by Halswelle under the title *Incident in a country church* in July 1874, and sold March 1875 for £550. Information courtesy of Michael Stewart.
- ⁴⁴ Royal Scottish Academy, Minutes of Council Meetings, 1876, 452-53.
- ⁴⁵ See correspondence between Keeley-Halswelle and J. Dick-Peddie, Royal Scottish Academy Letter Books, May-July 1876.
- ⁴⁶ Julian Campbell, 'Michael George Brennan. A Courtyard in Capri', Frederick Gallery exhibition catalogue (Dublin, 2001) no. 16.