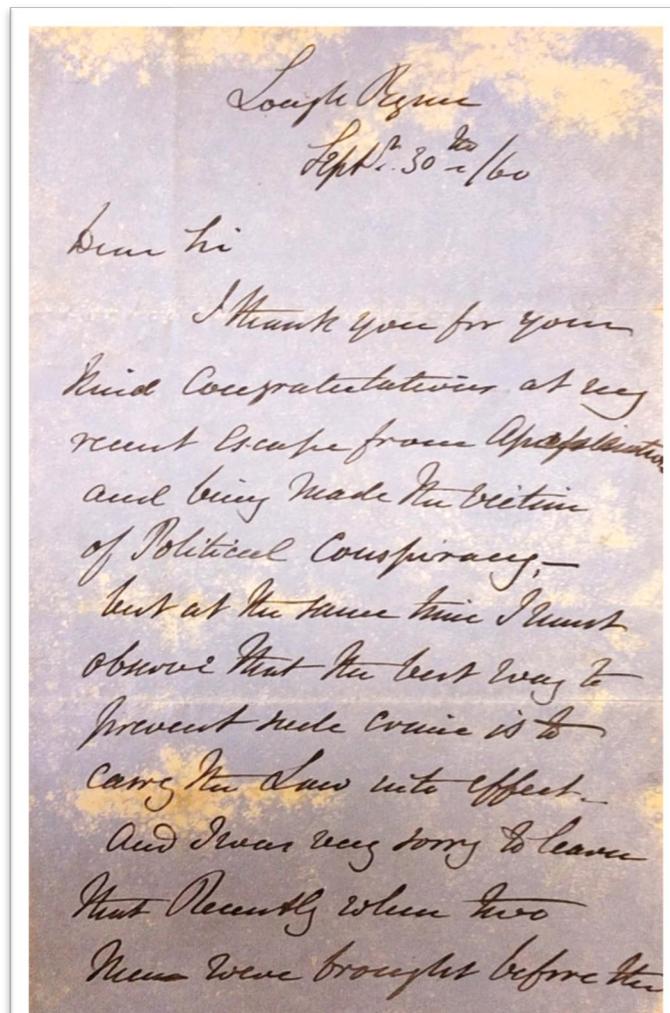


History Hub  
From the Archives  
2019



Lough Rye  
Sept. 30<sup>th</sup> /60

Dear Sir

I thank you for your  
kind Congratulations at my  
recent Escape from Apprehension  
and being made the victim  
of Political Conspiracy.—  
but at the same time I must  
observe that the best way to  
prevent such Crime is to  
carry the Law into effect.—  
and I was very sorry to learn  
that recently when two  
Men were brought before the

## Extracts from the Letters of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Leitrim

National Library of Ireland  
Ms. 21, 753

## Extracts from ‘Two Letters From Earl of Leitrim: 1839-1861’ National Library of Ireland, MS 21, 753.

On the 2nd of April 1878, the infamous Lord Leitrim was murdered. While en route to his Donegal estate traveling through Cratlagh Wood, three conspirators awaited Lord Leitrim’s passing coach. Together, they shot his clerk and coachman directly in the head and pursued the fleeing Lord Leitrim. After collapsing on the ground, one of the killers bludgeoned Lord Leitrim to death with the butt end of a gun. Erected at the site in 1960 in Kindrum, a memorial commemorating the three accomplices reads, ‘Erected to the memory of the three Fanad patriots, Neil Shiels *Doughmore*, Michael Herachty *Tullyconnell*, Michael McElwee *Ballywhorisky*, who by their heroism in Cratlagh Wood on the morning of 2nd April, 1878 ended the tyranny of landlordism.’ News of the despised landlord’s death sparked joyous celebrations throughout his estates.

This month’s documents are among twelve letters previewed at the National Library of Ireland penned between Lord Leitrim and his barrister George B. West Esq. on legal matters pertaining to family tragedy, tenant riots, and his growing fears of a political conspiracy to assassinate him from his Lough Rynn estate near Mohill, Co. Leitrim. The selected letters, with the first written in 1838 and the last in 1861, cover a large swatch of Lord Leitrim’s life and personal affairs and give insight into the man whose death would eventually be celebrated.

Lord Leitrim was born as William Sydney Clements in 1806 into a noble family whose once vast lands and wealth were shrinking due to opulent lifestyles and bureaucratic incompetence. In his early life, Lord Leitrim excelled in the British military, where he achieved the rank of captain. Later he was forced to trade his sword for ledgers and bureaucratic life, this inherited responsibility crushing his original aspirations and setting the stage for the villain of popular folklore.

The 1830s, from where we take the first of William Sydney’s letters, were a dark period for the Clements family. William Sydney’s mother suffered severely from mental illness, and his eldest brother Robert Bermingham died in January 1839. In a letter to Mr. West dated 2nd July, 1839, William Sydney expressed gratitude for Mr. West’s continued loyalty and sympathy for, ‘what is to me such a heartbreaking subject.’ Now the heir apparent to the Clements family estate, William Sydney rose to Viscount over lands plagued by lawlessness, while also being elected as MP for County Leitrim. This position would ultimately weaken an already strained relationship with his father, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Leitrim as the two disagreed on

many fundamental political issues. This distance continued until the father and son stopped speaking entirely. A year after his brother's death William Sydney did receive a letter written by a clerk on behalf of the 2nd Earl of Leitrim to William Sydney. The letter, dated 30 April 1840, reads, 'I would like to apologize to you for [The 2<sup>nd</sup> Lord Leitrim] not attending the funeral of your lamented brother, as he was employed all that morning from an early hour reporting the melancholy occurrence to the Lord Lieutenant.' This formal, distanced tone marked a stark change in their relationship. Unlike their correspondence following 1839, an extensive collection of informal letters from 1810-1825 exchanged between a younger Lord Leitrim and his family is suggestive of an affectionate and intimate upbringing.<sup>1</sup> The shattering of his family would fundamentally alter his character.

After 1839, 'the dashing, young soldier'<sup>2</sup> lost his youth as he grew into an obsessive landlord consumed with micromanaging his estates and winning petty legal battles over land. Following his father's death in 1854, William Sydney assumed the Earldom and altered his family's decline. With a keen eye for finance and a rigid, unforgiving stranglehold over his tenantry and estates, he restored his family's holdings.

In addition to the responsibility of becoming the Earl of Leitrim, issues of violence and crime in the local town of Mohill would fuel William Sydney's reputation as an unforgiving character. Much of his correspondence with West recounts acts of violence and destruction in this region, which had historically suffered from high crime rates. For instance, Lord Leitrim informed West of a resident's house that was, 'maliciously burned,' in 1839 by disgruntled tenant farmers, also remarking on his plans to leave town for his safety. In a letter marked 'Confidential' from 1855, a year after assuming the earldom, Lord Leitrim requested that West attend the Mohill Petty Sessions, a local court consisting of magistrates. The letter deals with two cases of riot by 'lunatics' in which he wished their 'small penalty' to be a 'cell in Gaol.' Reflecting his swift handling of justice to crime, tenants unable to make rent or farm the land effectively faced similarly harsh fates. During the Famine, he was unhesitant in evicting destitute tenants and ignoring the need for financial aid for the public. Popular folklore demonized him as a wicked tyrant and sexual predator and, by the 1860s, many attempts to assassinate Lord Leitrim surfaced.

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<sup>1</sup> Killadoon Papers, NLI, MSS 36,053-50.

<sup>2</sup> A.P.W. Malcomson's comprehensive *Virtues of a Wicked Earl*, Chapter 3, describes W.S. Clements as a disciplined and zealous young officer who enjoyed many relationships with women while stationed in various places like Lisbon. He would become known as a "woman hater" and died as a bachelor in his later life.

Now a staunch conservative, a mutual hostility between Lord Leitrim and the Lord Lieutenant Carlisle's Liberal administration burrowed into Clements's political and private life. On 15 September 1860, James Murphy shot and missed an oblivious Lord Leitrim as he walked down Mohill's Main Street. Recounting the episode in a letter to West dated fifteen days later, Clements described the event as, 'my recent escape from assassination and being made the victim of political conspiracy.' Although Murphy was reprieved due to insanity, Lord Leitrim blamed this and other assassination attempts through the 1860s on Carlisle and his Liberal supporters. As plots against his life continued to surface, Lord Leitrim, convinced of conspiratorial delusions, increased the degree to which he exerted the rule of law over his tenantry until his fateful murder on that early April day in 1878.

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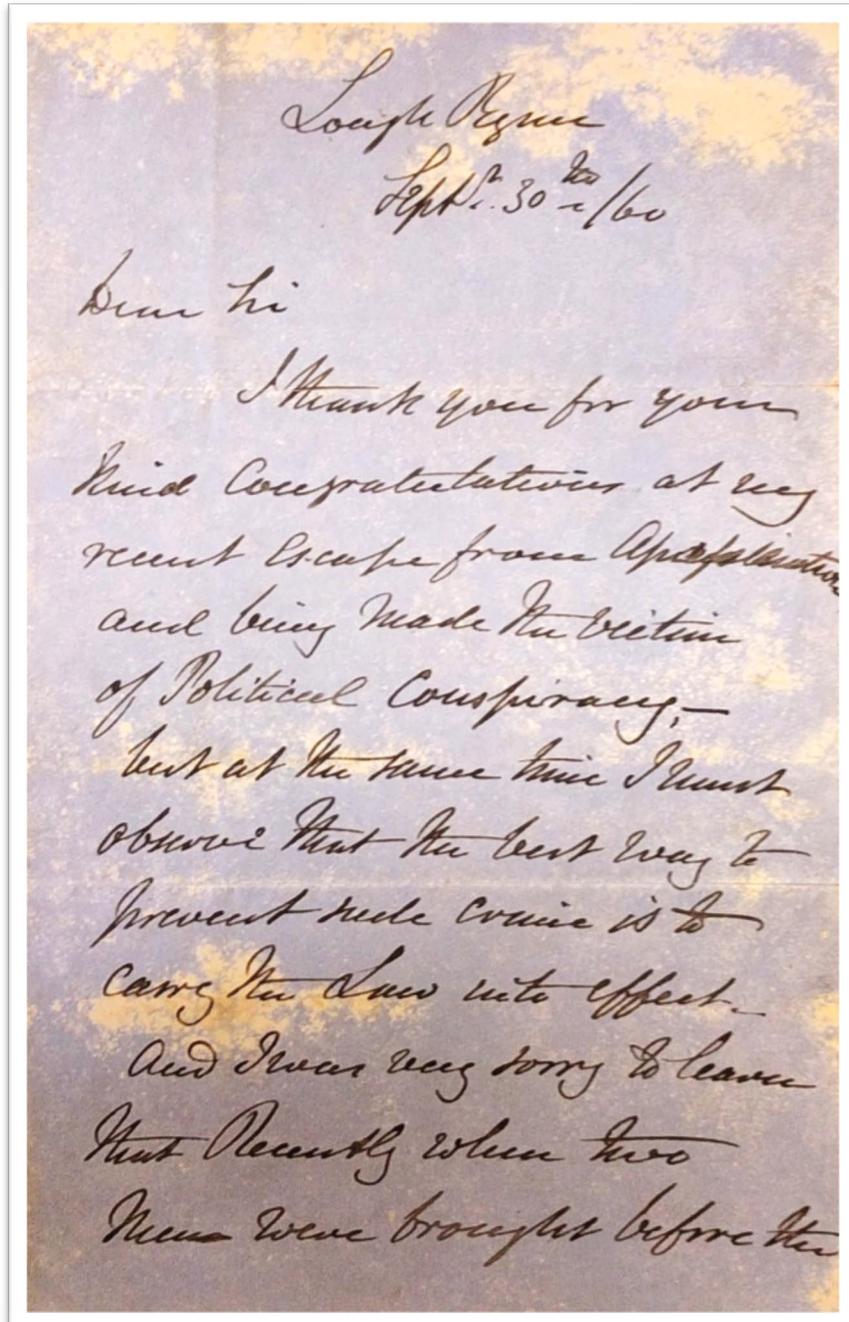
**Further Reading:**

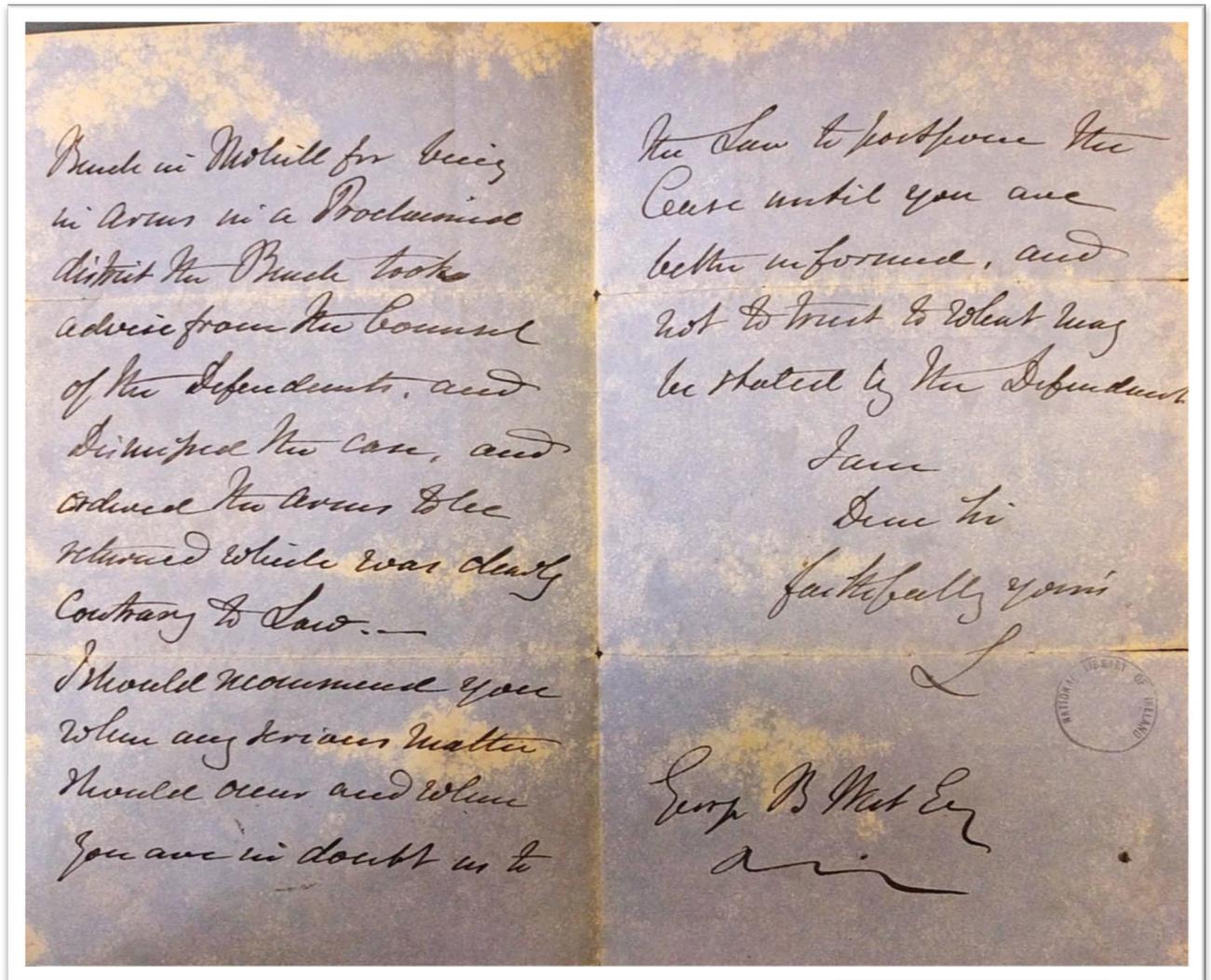
A.P.W. Malcomson, *Virtues of a Wicked Earl* (Dublin, 2009).

**Two letters from the Earl of Leitrim to George B. West of Drumdarkan, Co. Leitrim and associated letters, 1838-1840, also eight letters from Viscount Clements (aft. Lord Leitrim) to West with mention of agrarian crimes, and an assassination attempt on him (Lord Leitrim), 1846-1861.**

National Library of Ireland, MS 21, 753.

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Transcription:

Lough Rynn,  
Sept 30, 1860

Dear Sir,

I thank you for your kind congratulations at my recent escape from assassination and being made the victim of political conspiracy, but at the same time I must observe that the best way to prevent such crimes is to carry the law into full effect and I was very sorry to learn that recently when two men were brought before the bench at Mohill for being in arms in a Proclaimed district the bench took advice from the counsel of the defendants and dismissed the case, and ordered the arms to be returned which was clearly contrary to law. I shall recommend when any serious matter should occur and when you are in doubt as to the law to postpone the case until you are better informed, and not to trust to what may be stated by the defendant. Faithfully yours, -L