

# LIMERICK ~ AS OTHERS SAW US

by Paddy Lysaght

A surprising number of travellers from England and a few from Europe visited Limerick in the first half of the nineteenth century and left written accounts of what they saw. Apparently, the grand tour of Ireland was almost as fashionable as the grand tour of Europe. From these writers we get fascinating glimpses of Limerick's past, often not very complimentary, often biased and, since they repeat or even copy one another, very often tedious and dull.

And, as often happens, when the travellers take time off from writing about buildings, castles, bridges and gentlemen's seats, and speak to and describe the ordinary people of the town or county, they can be very instructive indeed.

But before hearing what these nineteenth century travellers said about us, we can be proud of Limerick's importance during the late mediaeval period by quoting from some earlier accounts.

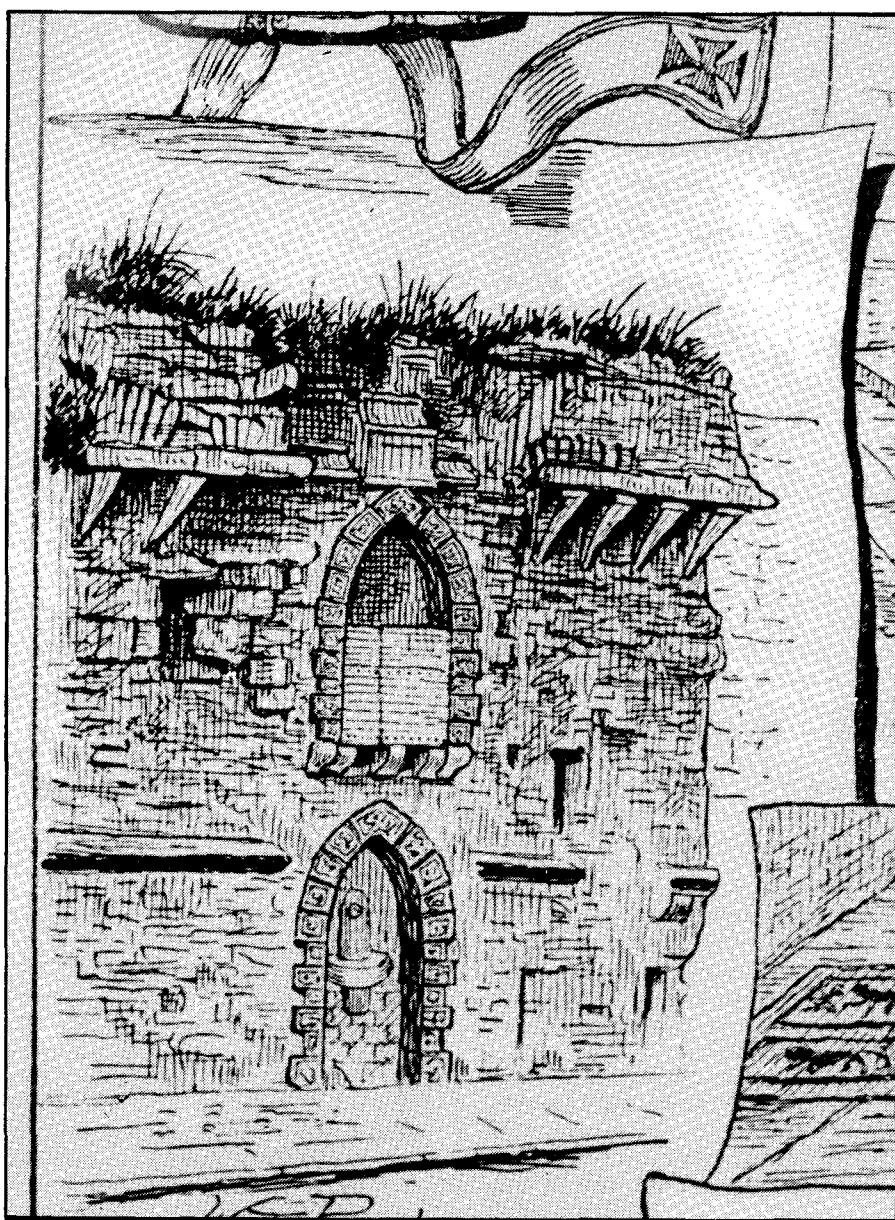
David Wolfe, Papal Nuntio to Ireland during the Desmond wars, described Limerick in 1574 as "the strongest and fairest of all the cities of Ireland, well walled with great walls of live rock and marble".

William Camden in his *Brittania*, published in 1586, has this to say: "This city is the great mart of the province of Munster".

And William Body, an intelligence officer in Cromwell's army, wrote this description of Limerick in 1536: "The city of Limerick is a wonderous proper city ... and it may be called Little London for the situation and plenty".

Again, Richard Stainhurst, that anti-Irish Irishman, corroborates what these have said. "Limerick", he wrote, "is the fairest city in Munster".

But let us concentrate on descriptions of Limerick and its people during the past century. Poverty was universal, and many of these accounts paint a sad picture of grinding misery, particularly in the Englishtown. Of course, pre-Famine Ireland, with its teeming population, especially in towns, was not the best place to reside, but to paint a true picture of Limerick one must quote



*The remains of Bourke House, Athlunkard Street.*

from some of those who saw the worst and described it.

In a book, published in 1836, entitled "*Journal of a tour of Ireland during the months of Oct. and Nov. 1835*" the anonymous author has this to say about St. Mary's parish:

"If I was to relate one tenth of the miseries I witnessed, it would be deemed incredible ... Four families sometimes in a room; one at each corner, nestled together to keep off the cold, on loose dirty straw, with one rug only between them; and young women without body linen or clothes of any kind under the rug".

A harrowing account, yet many travellers have described similiar or even worse situations, for it was pre-Famine Ireland, a dark period in our city's story.

But all was not darkness and gloom. For instance, the beauty of the women of Limerick seems to have been noted by many travellers. Take this from *Heath's Picturesque Annual for 1838*:

"I must notice the reputation for female beauty enjoyed by Limerick for at least two centuries. I have no hesitation in saying that I think the reputation is justly enjoyed. I saw a much greater number of beautiful faces, in proportion to the size of the population of the town, than is usual; and even in the shops I think the average is very high indeed".

Or this from John Bernard Trotters *Walks Through Ireland in 1812*:

"Female beauty has been much and deservedly celebrated in Limerick. On Sunday's there is a great display of it, as well as consummate elegance and taste in the dress of the ladies".

Johann George Kohl, an experienced and accurate observer, goes to town on the Limerick beauties in his *Travels in Ireland*, published in 1844.

"The fairest thing in Limerick, however, is the fair sex. The Limerick lasses are as famous in Ireland as the Lancashire witches and the Welch women are in England. It is worthy of remark that both these places so renowned for the beauty of their women, are situated in the West, and, indeed, in the more Celtic wests of both islands. Can it be that the greater mixture of the Saxon with the Celtic race has here produced this greater degree of beauty? In western and southern Ireland, Spanish blood too, has been mixed with that of the people; and perhaps it is this admixture of southern fire with northern tenderness which has produced so beneficial a result".

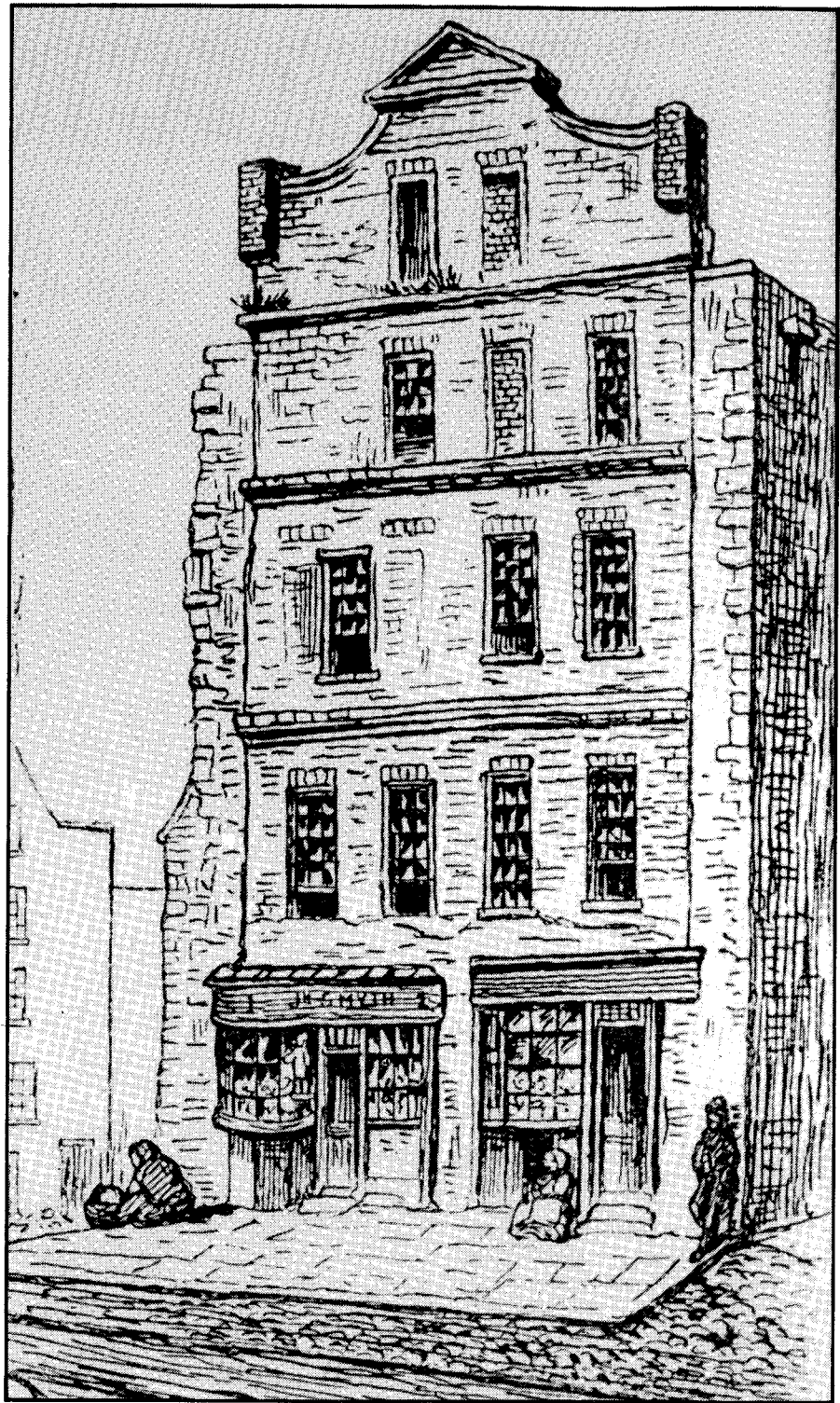
He rounds off all this with the philosophical thought: "Yet who can fathom all the mysteries which are to be found in the formation and rearing of beautiful women!".

William Makepeace Thackeray, in his *Irish Sketch Book*, published in 1843, says:

"If the ladies of the place are pretty, indeed the vulgar are scarcely less so. I never saw a greater number of kind, pleasing, clever-looking faces among any set of people".

The same author, with his gift for words, gives a vivid picture of O'Connell Street:

"In this handsome street is a handsome club-house, with plenty of idlers, you may be sure, lolling at the portico; likewise you see numerous young officers, with very tight waists and absurd brass shell



A Dutch-gabled house and shops.

epaulettes to their little absurd frock coats, walking the pavement, the dandies of the street. Then you behold whole troops of pear-apple-and plum-women, selling very raw green-looking fruit, which, indeed, it is a wonder that any one should eat and live".

He also notes the number of young men lolling about the streets and "in every street you will be pretty sure to see a recruiting sergeant with gay ribbons in his cap, loitering about with an eye upon the other loiterers there".

What he noticed in the pretty villas in the Irishtown is also worth retelling:

"On the bridge are walking twenty-four young girls, in parties of four and five, with their arms around each other's waists, swaying to and fro, and singing or chattering, as happy as if they had shoes on their feet".

Yes, Thackeray's account raises our spirits, giving the impression of a busy town, poverty-stricken perhaps, but with colour and happiness and vitality there as well.

Limerick lassies for their beauty,

Limerick lace for the fineness of its texture and Limerick gloves small enough to fit into a walnut or to be pulled through a wedding ring - for these Limerick was famous. Why we should be noted for glove-making is indeed curious, for apart from a small factory which seems to have operated only for a short time, gloves do not appear to have been made here. Even as early as 1815 Anne Plumtree noted this when she wrote:

"The reputation of the place for gloves is well known; but I found that there are many more Limerick glove manufacturers at Dublin and Cork than in Limerick".

Another traveller tells the story of a merchant excusing himself for not supplying Limerick gloves because he has not yet received his stock from Cork where Limerick gloves were then made!

And so all was not doom and gloom in the Limerick of the 19th century. There was, as we have seen, much bustle and life about as well. Listen to what *Heath's Picturesque Annual* has to say about the Irishtown:

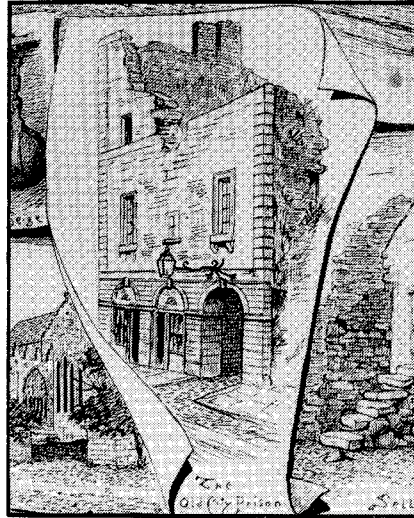
"The streets are full of traffic; the bustle is continuous from morning 'till night; and if the business of supplying the necessaries and luxuries of the poor does not appear magnificent in detail, it is at least of some importance in the aggregate. Whiskey is, of course, the grand luxury ... the next luxury in the magnitude of supply appears to be apples. The quantities of this agreeable and wholesome fruit which I saw exposed for sale in the streets here, and in other towns, are beyond anything of the kind I ever witnessed in other countries. The price cried in Limerick was twenty a penny".

And then there was music. Bernard Trotter, the eccentric son of a Co. Down clergyman, lived a very chequered career. At one time he decided to set out on foot on a tour of Ireland with a view to publishing his observations. Since he often stayed the night with the poorest, and even shared their meals, his impressions were written from first hand experience. In his book, *Walks through Ireland*, 73 pages of which is devoted to Limerick, we read:

"About three miles from Limerick I stopped at an inn where, the young lad (of the house) played several Irish airs on a small octave flute for us. At our request his mother sang several plaintive and mournful airs in the genuine Irish manner, which pleased us greatly. Every cadence of her song was performed with genuine pathos, and her voice did them much justice".

"I have frequently heard the loud song of labourers returning from work. They sang Irish airs, in the Irish language, with surprising beauty and effect. Their airs were

not always plaintive, but we heard some finely martial ones as well. You cannot imagine how we enjoyed them".



*The Old City Prison.*

Kohl too has an interesting observation to make about the Irish people's love of music. After the crowds had dispersed, following a Daniel O'Connell meeting, he notes:

"Some of them, however, followed an Irish piper, who, surrounded by hundreds of listeners, went through the streets, stopping now and then at the door of some respectable-looking house, and playing his old Irish melodies. When a liveried servant made his appearance, the piper was called in, and the gaping multitude dispersed. The Irish pipes appear to me to be the most skilful in the world; and though, like my travelling acquaintance, they have not all learned their music from fairies, yet they know how to put as much sweetness as possible into this disagreeable instrument, and I believe they are often engaged to play at evening parties in the houses of the wealthy, especially those of the south of Ireland, who are celebrated for their skill".

A French emigrant Monsieur de Latocnaye, who published his *Rambles Through Ireland in 1799*, witnessed a wake, and his account is worth repeating:

"It was a Sunday and the women do not bawl out so loud on that day; but what was remarkable was that the corpse was on a table, and the house was as full as it could hold of women squatting on the floor. The men to the number of 200, were on the road both on foot and on horseback, and several were at the next ale-house, waiting with patience the dead man's departure".

Sir Richard Colt Hoare Bart, in his *Journal of a Tour in Ireland* in 1806 complements what the Frenchman noted by giving us an account of a fun-

eral he witnessed in the city:

"I encountered a funeral most numerous attended by people on horseback and on foot. The funeral car differed widely from those made use of in England; being a low carriage on four wheels, at each corner of which was a pillar supporting a canopy, decorated with a lofty plume of feathers in the centre, and a smaller one at each angle: beneath was placed the coffin, and at each corner sat a female figure. The whole had an awful and picturesque effect".

Such anecdotes and sketches, each revealing a different vista of 19th century Limerick, could be multiplied many times over. One will tell us about the Limerick races when the town was full of racers and idlers and as many as 20,000 people, and about bucks from Cork and Youghal who came to the races with the intention of shooting some of the people of Limerick, and how during the race week eight duels were fought, one officer of the Irish Brigade being killed. Another traveller gives a vivid account of a faction fight he saw in the streets, but it is too long to give here. One who visited the "mammoth lunatic asylum" noted the red bonnets worn by the inmates, which, he assumes, "will make them madder still".

Apparently, even in those days people were doing their best to keep up with the Jones's. In 1838 Leith Ritchie noted:

"But though the inhabitants, therefore, do not belong to the class of those who would be called wealthy people in London, there is a great deal of pretension in their way of living, and an air of fashion in their appearance, which is not surpassed in Dublin. The streets swarm with jaunting cars; and this is not surprising in a place where everybody considers himself entitled to the distinction of keeping one".

This same traveller notes that "there are galleries in Irish churches laid out in pews for the rich, while the poor on the stone floor below separate as to sex, the men going to one side the women to the other".

Well, well, and we thought that it was only in Ballrooms of Romance that such segregation took place!

These are a few almost random samples of what travellers wrote about us. Prejudice, both political and religious, culpable ignorance, and a blind belief in the superiority (in most of these writers) of the English way of life, is, I think, evident in what they wrote, and especially in the introductions to most of these accounts. One wonders if it ever occurred to any of them, that the Irish were an ancient race which had, in fact, brought Christianity and culture to Britain in the less fortunate days of the sister isle.