

SCENES FROM A LIMERICK CHILDHOOD

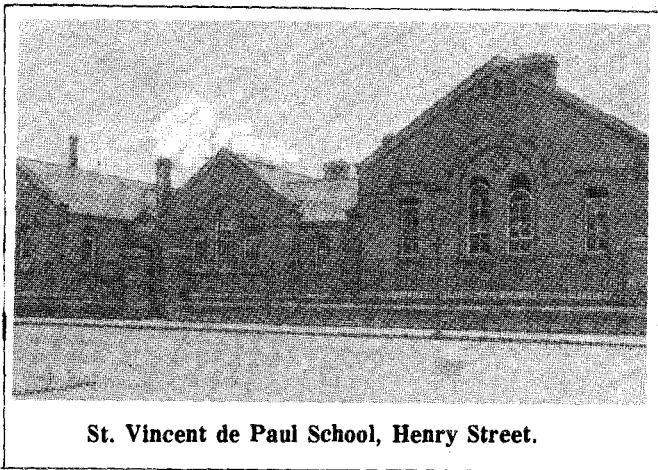
Donall Mac Amhlaigh

Between the ages of six and eight, from 1932 to 1934, I lived in Sarsfield Barracks, Limerick. It was there that I began school, made my First Communion and acquired a marked Limerick accent - traces of which, I am told, remain with me to this day. Some of my recollections of Limerick are less real memories, I suppose, than impressions but they are quite vivid nonetheless. It may come as a surprise to Limerick people to hear that until quite recently my abiding impression of their city was that of pervasive melancholy, with the gentle, somehow timeless chiming of Cannock's clock articulating that feeling of sadness. This perception of melancholy, which must have its origin in some forgotten childhood experience, was dispelled finally last year when I spent a few very enjoyable days in Limerick.

My father, a company quartermaster in the Fourth Battalion at the time, was a Thomondgate man himself and so we were not short of friends and relatives in the city; often on Sundays we would set off for the Quarry Road, on a visit to my cousins the Bashfords, and Nana and Papa Byrnes who lived only a few doors away. Patie Bashford, my aunt Molly's husband, had been all through the Great War (as had my father) in the Munster Fusiliers... Paschendaale Ridge, Poperinge, Gallipoli and other scenes of carnage. They were great buddies but my father rarely spoke about the war, not until he'd had a few jars anyway. After the Great War, like many another, he came home and joined the I.R.A. (East Clare Brigade) and, with the signing of the Truce, he took the Free State side, believing that it was the only practical course. The waste and tragedy of the Civil War grieved him all his life, though he had the personal consolation, as he often remarked himself, of not seeing a shot fired in anger from start to finish. Galway, where he was then stationed and where he met my mother, was more fortunate than other places in this respect.

Quarry Road was a place of magic for me as a boy: there were tadpoles and pinkeens to be caught in jam-jars in the pond and Papa Byrnes (or was it his sons, George and Dick?) had a loft-full of cooing pigeons, fascinating birds with staring, expressionless eyes and jerky neck movements. Papa Byrnes was a gentle, grandfatherly old man and his wife, Nana, has been described as the matriarch of Quarry Road. She was a real character with a tongue that could be sometimes quite sharp and a gift for deflating pretension, and she used to tease me without mercy. There was a large framed print above the mantlepiece and the twin china dogs so popular in Ireland then, a picture, it may have been, of some cavalry regiment at Waterloo, or perhaps Balaclava, and she would point them out to me as 'those fine soldiers', comparing our own army up in Sarsfield Barracks unfavourably with them. This never failed to provoke me to tantrums, much to the amusement of everyone.

A door or two away, as I remember it, was Fred Walters' house; Fred who died in 1957, I think, had something of a reputation as a strong man and he carted coal from the docks for years until he began the coal and



St. Vincent de Paul School, Henry Street.

turf business which one of his sons, Ger, carries on in Kileely today. I visited Ger and his wife, Marie, last summer and Fred's widow, my aunt Mae. When asked if she could recognise me Mae replied that she thought I looked like 'young Jim'. 'Young Jim', my father, would be eighty-six if he were alive today... Mae is a sprightly and voluble lady, well up in her eighties herself, and my aunt Molly, who died early this year in Birmingham, where she had lived for some years with her daughter Eily, was a storehouse of information about old Thomondgate; almost ninety when she passed on, her mind was as keen as ever and I regret now that I saw so little of her over the years. There was so much she could have told me.

I began school in Henry Street, or the 'Fathers' as it was called, and my teacher was a Miss Hanrahan who, I imagine, would have been quite young at the time. I am not certain and I would have to hunt out the book that Mainchin Seoighe wrote about him, but it may well be that Sean South and I were at the Henry Street School at the same time. Miss Hanrahan instilled in me a love of the Irish language which I never lost; she also, at her own expense, if I remember right, equipped us with tin drums, cymbals and some simple instruments with which we gave a tolerable rendering of *Faith of Our Fathers*.

I made my First Communion in St. Joseph's Church and, as was the custom then in Limerick, and no doubt still is, I did the rounds of my friends and relatives in Thomondgate and Bengal Terrace, returning home to Sarsfield Barracks that evening rich as Damer, my pockets bulging with half-crowns, florins, bobs, tanners and 'wings'.

I didn't distinguish myself at school but for a time I displayed certain anti-social attitudes which happily did not persist... one afternoon on my way home from school I came upon two bigger boys turning cartwheels on the footpath where Eric Lynch now has his public house and as I was passing them some coins fell from their pockets and rolled about the road. With no sense of wrongdoing I swooped on the money and made off with a shilling and a sixpenny piece, hotly pursued by the outraged lads. I must

have had some potential as a runner then for they never caught up with me and abandoned the chase before I reached the barrack gates; greed rather than any sense of guilt made me keep quiet about my acquisition until that night when, in the tin bath tub before the glowing range, my mother prised the one-and-six from my grubby little palm. The father was called to witness my villainy; he lectured me at some length on the sin of theft and then took off for the sergeant's mess with the confiscated money. Eighteen pence would have bought a couple of pints, no doubt, in those days...

I committed a rather more grievous offence after this. There was a shop on Barrack Hill where we 'dealt' - paid for our purchases by the week or the month, it may have been - and, as my mother was unwell for a number of weeks, a lot of the shopping was entrusted to me. I soon realised the possibilities of the credit facilities and along with the items of grocery I began treating myself to strips of Black Jack and a brand of toffee called NKM ('Enkame' in the local dialect), to name only two of my favourite confections. It must have been around Easter then for there were chocolate eggs on sale too, a mouth-watering variety set in a kind of edible nest with a bright yellow chick on top; there was also a mineral drink called Olo which I quickly became partial to, and so the bill began to mount frighteningly. Why the shopkeeper didn't tumble to my little game I can't imagine but I think that I managed to convince her on one occasion that my parents sanctioned all this indulgence. But, not content with treating myself, I soon extended the bounty to some of the other barrack kids (only two of their names remain with me now - Sean Edge, who lived in the married quarters block where we lived, and Dick Crean, whose father was the Commanding Officer in Sarsfield). So we chewed NKM toffees and Black Jacks in some remote corner of the barracks and washed them down with bottles of Olo, and to Sean Edge's practical suggestion that we return the Olo bottles and claim the (half-penny?) deposit, Dick Crean replied that in the best circles, at hunt balls and the likes, glasses were always smashed after the toast! Thus the Olo bottles were dashed against the barrack wall in the profligate manner of the Old Gentry, and by the time my deceit was uncovered the bill was a couple of pounds in excess of what it should have been... how the Da kept his hands off me I'll never know, for like many a man who was fond of a jar he was a great advocate of thrift in household matters. He did, however, christen me the 'Olo Merchant', a title I found an irksome reminder of my little binge.

As in every town in Ireland, there must have been a lot of hardship in Limerick in the early 'thirties but army families were spared the worst of it and Sarsfield Barracks was quite a good place to grow up in. There was a green field for hurling, dug-outs and shelters in which to

play, holes and corners that were all the more fun to explore for being 'out of bounds'. I remember the Volunteer Force with their ridiculous comic-opera uniform and the derision they evoked among regular soliders; I also remember a visit by the First (Irish-speaking) Battalion from Renmore Barracks, Galway, and the huge amusement they caused among themselves in Irish; we were a very parochial people in those days. The Irish speakers were referred to as 'Taw Shaws' in Sarsfield (not 'Ta Sés', as in other places) and they were the subject of as much comment as if they had been a contingent of the Russian Army. Some of them, to be sure, were rough diamonds and displayed some of the less attractive characteristics of rural Ireland: I often heard my father tell how one of them, strolling down O'Connell Street and seeing a prosperous-looking lady with a pekinese dog on a lead, bent down, picked up the unfortunate dog, and threw it across the road! I had lived in Galway before this and heard Irish spoken naturally by the older people in my mother's village and so I felt quite an affinity with the Cead Cath men - I was to spend three years in that battalion later on - but their Irish was much too racy and idiomatic for me at the time.

Despite the poverty in the Ireland of the early 1930s, it must have been a measure of our relative prosperity that my mother could afford a half-crown to bring in an Irish-speaking girl who lived in the city to teach me for an hour or so every week. Who the girl was I have no idea now but if she is alive she would be no more than sixty, at the most, today. An unemployed or a poorly-paid worker would not have been able to afford such extravagance in those times and neither, to be fair, could you blame him if he did not see the necessity of making his children learn the language.

Thrift was a necessary virtue in those times and very little clothes were bought for us off the peg; my mother could run up little shirts and trousers on an old rattling Singer sewing machine and I remember her taking myself and my younger brother Kevin to have coats made for us by a dressmaker somewhere in one of the more dilapidated areas of the city. The lady had a little daughter called Breda, confined to a wheelchair, a wistful-looking, delicate child who would talk with us eagerly whenever we were brought along for a fitting. Another stray memory is of having my hair cut by a barber somewhere near the railway station; the barber, that day, must have had a jar too many for he was making heavy work of the short back-and-sides and the next thing I knew he fell, overturning the high chair I was perched on... My mother rescued me and fled, and the poor barber was at the loss of a customer.

The haunting smell of spices, dried fruit and bacon in Fitt's grocery shop (now sadly gone); the delight of watching the caged ferrets in the market, with their



Thomondgate "of social joys".



The St. Vincent de Paul School Band.

questing noses and pink eyes; the odd trip to the Lyric where I first saw King Kong... is it true that the missionary once began his sermon to a depleted congregation in the Dominican Church opposite, with the words, 'Ding-dong the church is empty, King-Kong the Lyric's full!'. ?

On sunny days we would go to the People's Park behind the City Library where my mother would read to us and to the other children who soon gathered round. One saw many shabbily-clad children in those days but I imagine that life must have been very good for people in worthwhile employment - the wholesome quality of food, the pollution-free air and waters, the uncluttered roads. Work, on the other hand, must have been brutally hard: I know a man who shovelled gravel for ten hours a day, Monday to Friday, and until four on Saturday afternoon, in 1948, for £4.10.0. a week; he never worked so hard since or before as he did then in Limerick. And of course the drudgery on the Shannon Scheme is legendary...

As might be expected of a family with local connections, we imbibed at an early age a sense of Limerick's history and tradition. My father had a copy of *Lays and Legends of Thomond* and he could quote large chunks of *Drunken Thady* at will; where other kids dreaded the Banshee or some such malign spirit, it was the Bishop's Lady I feared, especially after been shown the mark of poor Thady's fingers on Thomond Bridge. Criostoir O Floinn in his fascinating introduction to Michael Hogan's best-remembered poem puts that particular bit of folklore in perspective but it impressed me mightily for years. My grandfather whom I never saw was described, rather quaintly in the Limerick vernacular, as 'a great Ireeshan', and no doubt he knew Poet Hogan well; I believe that he had a great store of folklore and verse, though whether any of this was in the ancestral language I cannot say.

Limerick people were, then, as now, very convivial; great ones for the song with a tradition of light and comic opera not equalled anywhere outside Cork, - certainly there was nothing like it in Galway where I spent a lot of my youth. As a child I was familiar with such favourites as *When Other Lips and Other Hearts*, *Scenes That Are Brightest* and others. John McCormack was in his heyday of course and the popular songs of the days, as I remember were: *The Isle of Capri*, *Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life* and *Toscelli's Serenade*. My father often told me that when he was a lad the messenger boys making their deliveries on their heavy bikes sang arias from the popular operas - a far cry from the punk culture of today. Here in Northampton an enclave of Limerickmen, mostly from the Island Field, kept alive the tradition of song well into the 1950s - Bill McCormack had a fine voice and Kevin (Knobby) Boland and Mick (Pincher) Moran were often called upon, too; Mick Conway from St. John's parish, I think, was a good singer and the late Christy Moran preferred the rural touch and his speciality was always *The Galbally Farmer*. There were a lot of excursions from Limerick when I was a child and, tight as things must have been, it was usual to see crowds hitting off on Sunday for Kilkee or Galway; nearer home

Castleconnell and Doonass were great favourites, too, and I remember being taken out to see the Shannon Scheme at an early age. A monument should have been erected to the men who toiled there for so small a reward...

My father often regaled us with tales of his boyhood in Limerick. He had an older brother, Tommy, who worked on the G.S.R. - it may have been as a fireman - and my father's first real job was as a railway knocker-up, a thankless enough task it would seem, for when he aroused a driver in the small hours of the morning he was often rewarded with a clip on the ear! Prior to that he earned a few bob working the organ bellows in one of the Protestant churches, a task he performed only under parental duress, being convinced that his immortal salvation was thus imperilled! When he began working as an engine cleaner on the railway my uncle Tommy would inveigle him into a game of pitch-and-toss on pay nights; invariably my father lost all his money and when he would begin to blubber in consequence the older brother would hit him a slap on the ear with the dubious consolation, "Ah stop winging, Jim, sure it's all coming into the same house!"

Tommy, like my father, went through most of the Great War but he never returned. They met somewhere in France shortly before Armistice Day and Tommy told my father, "We've come through, kid! Keep the head down, it's nearly over now!" It was certainly over for poor Tommy - a sergeant in the Munsters - for he was wounded by a German sniper on the very last day of the war and died that Christmas in a military hospital in France. Some weeks before this, when there was a prospect of his recovery, he wrote to my aunt Molly in Thomondgate that he'd be home for Christmas, 'and we'll have a great night in Quilty's' (the well known Thomondgate pub).



A well drilled class.

The day we buried my own father in 1969 my aunt Molly and her husband Patie somehow got around to the circumstances of my father's enlistment in the Munsters - my aunt blaming her husband for enticing him away and her husband stoutly denying this! It was as if they were discussing the events of the previous week and not something that happened over half a century before... One way or the other England owes a debt to the men of Limerick, for my father's eldest brother, Big Dan, as he was called, could boast of having been in France and Flanders, 1914-15-16-17 and 1918; there were many thousands such men all over Munster; in every province in Ireland for that matter. My cousin, Danny Joe Macauley, who will be remembered by *Limerick Leader* readers for the many verses he contributed over the years, died recently; last summer I visited him in the company of another first cousin, John Bashford of the ITGWU, and found him an entertaining and couteous person. Like myself, he regretted that we had lost touch over the years.

Limerick has lost much of its fine architectural heritage since I lived there as a boy; but much, too, remains. My strongest impression from last year's visit was of the unflinching civility of its citizens and I hope to renew their acquaintance in the years ahead. "Gura fada buan iad".