

The Shamrock League

by Des Ryan

In recognition of her Irish regiments, and Irishmen serving in British regiments in South Africa, Queen Victoria, through a special army order issued on 7 March 1900, allowed her Irish soldiers to wear the shamrock on their tunics on St. Patrick's day. This occurred just before her visit to Ireland that same year. One contemporary source of the period said that the queen had never done anything more timely or popular, but couldn't understand why Irishmen serving in the British Army should have been forbidden to wear the shamrock in the first place; it was a mystery and beyond comprehension.³ Others saw it as the hijacking of the shamrock in the cause of British imperialism. Victoria died on 22 January 1901.

Shortly afterwards in Limerick, May Burke-Irwin, better known at that time as the Countess of Limerick, or Lady Limerick, set up an association, known as the "Shamrock League," to help the wives and widows of Irish soldiers who were disabled or had died during the war. May was the eldest daughter of Joseph Burke Irwin, a Dublin magistrate who later moved to Limerick. She was also an accomplished composer and piano player, having lived in Paris and studied under the Polish pianist, Paderewski.⁴ On 23 July 1890, she married William Pery and they lived at Kildare Castle. They had three children, Imelda, Victoria and Edmond. Imelda, the first born, died two days after

birth. When Williams father, who was the 3rd Earl of Limerick, died, he moved to the family home at Dromore Castle, Pallaskenry, and became the 4th Earl of Limerick. The building suffered from dampness and May, now Lady Limerick, or the Countess, wasn't too happy there.⁵

When the Countess, a typical Irish-woman in beauty, wit and dash,⁶ was asked how she came up with the idea of the League, she said "I was sitting at the piano soon after the death of the queen, and had just composed a little piece, which I called "The Shamrock", I was thinking of the war and the sorrow that it caused to the poor families in Ireland and elsewhere, when an inspiration came over me, and I said, why not try, by selling the shamrock, to make a lot of money for them."⁷ "I could not rest," she said, "until I had mentioned the idea to Sir James Cleeve and Lady Cleeve."⁸

After enlisting the help of the Cleeve family, the Countess decided to call a meeting, which was held on Saturday, 9 February 1901, at a Miss Smith's in Thomas Street. It was here that the idea of the Shamrock League got off the ground. It was largely attended and the ladies present agreed to send as much shamrock as they possibly could to the League's office at 50, George's Street (O'Connell Street) as it was felt there would be a large demand for the shamrock. It was request-

ed that all shamrocks be picked with as much root as possible and left damp, and with some moss on them to be used as packing. The closing date for delivery to the office, where it would be packed and posted to England, was by 11 o'clock on the 13th of March. Members of the League were expected to help with the packing.

The Countess was elected president. The vice-president was Lady Clarina and the hon. sec. was Mrs. Conyers. Leaflets advertising the Shamrock League were printed by Messrs McKerns, George Street, and members were expected to get some and send them to their friends in England in the hope of getting new orders.⁹

Two weeks later one of the local newspapers reported that Lady Cleeve was treasurer and also an hon. secretary and that the Shamrock League had arranged to send out shamrocks in beautiful tin boxes direct from Limerick at four shillings and two and sixpence, post free. Orders for shamrock were to be sent to 131 George Street (where Roche's Stores nursery stood until recently). All profits, it was stated, would go to the Soldiers and Sailors Families Association.¹⁰ On 16 March, the Countess thanked all those who had helped with the preparation and packing of the shamrock and also those who had contributed financially. The Countess felt sure that this was the start of bigger and better things and that their efforts would bring comfort to those who were sorrowful and saddened by the loss of their loved ones.¹¹



Shamrock League box, 1903

(Limerick Museum)

"The employees of Cleeves" she said "all over the country took up the cause and did a considerable amount of work in connection with it with a heartiness and zeal beyond praise. In many instances the employees of the various factories themselves collected the shamrock, which they gave to us. They also received and paid for shamrock gathered by the sympathising peasantry." Some of the women who had gathered shamrock would not take payment for it.¹² "I received a huge basket of shamrock from an old peasant woman, who, handing them to me, said: take them from the mother of six gallant Irish byes, all soldiers of the king and queen, and three of whom lie buried in Africky, two of whom are still fighting, god bless 'em and bring 'em safe home to their poor ould mother in Oireland. I insisted upon paying her, but she waved me off with her stick, remarking: "ah, sure, yer honour, its a pleasure entoirly to git these shamrocks, and its mesilf thats rale proud to be pickin thim; but its niver a penny I wants. The pleasure of seeing yersilf is payment. The next day she left another large basket at Dromore gate lodge, and hobbled away hurriedly in order to avoid payment. There are dozen upon dozens of cases of such unselfish kindness on the part of the poor peasant women."¹³

The Countess then went on to list the villages and towns that she had received shamrock from: Bruree, Caherconlish, Pallas, Carrick-on-Suir, Ballyneety, Bansha, Limerick Junction, Clonmel, Kanturk, Tipperary, Killaloe, Birdhill, Mallow, Croom, Pallaskenry, Askeaton, Ballingarry, Cashel and Kingsbridge. She also thanked a number of families who had donated large boxes of shamrock to the League, the Cleeves, Barringtons, Delmeges, O'Maras and Matternsons, just to name a few. They had also received, she said, a considerable number of packages anonymously.¹⁴ The efforts of the League paid off handsomely. In their first year in business they were able to hand over nearly £400 to the Soldiers and Sailors Families Association.¹⁵

In 1902, following on the great success that she had achieved, the Countess decided to continue on with the financial support that they were giving to the Soldiers and Sailors Families Association. She convened a meeting of the League for Saturday afternoon, 3rd March, at Miss Smiths in Thomas Street. In her opening words to the meeting she said: "Ladies - I am every pleased indeed to meet you all here again, as it proves to me that the organisation called the Shamrock League is not a mere passing affair, but that it has come to stay. It is said that nothing succeeds like success, and the success which attended our efforts last year will, I am quite confident, result in even greater success this year." She informed the gathering that Sir Thomas Cleeve had kindly suggested that the factory girls would do the packing of the shamrocks.¹⁶ She noticed, from the order book, that large orders for shamrocks had been



The Countess of Limerick, 1897

(Limerick Museum)

received already, some from as far away as Switzerland and South Africa. She then mentioned that all orders for shamrock would come in this year direct to Sir Thomas Cleeve's offices.

This arrangement would save an immense amount of trouble. It was decided among those present to send their shamrocks for packing to the Cleeve Brothers store at Howley's Quay, no later than 15th March, where the factory girls would do the packing.¹⁷ The cover of the boxes for 1902, which were adorned with exquisite shamrocks around the edges, would also carry a portrait of the new king, Edward VII and Queen Alexandra, who, by following the example of Queen Victoria, had also ordered shamrock from the Countess. Each box, it was felt, would be treasured as a dainty souvenir of their coronation. Orders for shamrock, accompanied by postal order, were to be made payable to Lady Cleeve, who was treasurer.¹⁸

In a letter that she wrote to the English newspaper, the Daily Mail, she said: "In Limerick a few days before St. Patrick's Day you will find the great warehouses of Cleeve Brothers teeming with activity. The whole establishment is given over to the work of sorting and packing the shamrock. The neighbourhood of Limerick has gone shamrock picking with a vengeance. Some hundreds of girls are employed day after day to pick the little trefoil, bringing back tons of it at night to

be sorted and packed by other willing hands. Many old soldiers, too, are employed at this work. It is impossible for me to exaggerate the extent of the sunshine and happiness that have thus been brought into many a poor Irish family.

At Messrs Cleeves warehouse, you will find side by side with the handsome factory girls the ladies of the county, their pretty arms bared and huge white aprons covering their dresses, hard at work, picking, sorting, packing, and addressing, for the work during the next week will be prodigious, and all must help. The facilities of the Post Office will be taxed to the utmost, but even here there is enthusiasm and good nature under the most trying circumstances.

I have received many letters from the widows of soldiers and the wives of those who have been disabled in the war. All are full of warm hearted thanks to the League for what it has done for them through the little shamrock." The Countess signed herself as: May Limerick.

The Boer War ended in May 1902, but the Shamrock League continued on with its charitable work for many years afterwards, right up to the years of the First World War.

In March 1903, due to illness, the Countess had to remain at home and was unable to give her time to the selection and packing of the shamrock. Supervision of the work was taken over by Lady Cleeve



Hall Place, Bexley, Kent, home of Lady Limerick

and Mrs. J.B. Barrington. The cover of the boxes for that year carried a portrait of the Countess¹⁹ (one of these boxes can be seen at our City Museum). In later years, a share of the profits from selling the shamrock were given to the nursing of poorer people who were unable to afford it,²⁰ and also to Barrington's Hospital.²¹ Maybe this was due to the fact that the Countess herself had been confined to hospital in Dublin for a number of weeks.²²

On 28 June 1914, two shots were fired in the Bosnian town of Sarajevo that were to change the face of Europe forever. This was the assassination of the heir to the Austrian throne, the Arch-Duke Franz Ferdinand and his wife, Sophia. This incident led to the outbreak of the First World War.

In March 1915, the work of the Shamrock League was directed towards helping the Red Cross. The ladies of the city and county of Limerick were asked to redouble their efforts and get in as much shamrock as possible, as it was felt that there would be an abnormal demand for civilian and military requirements. The Earl of Dunraven told the Countess that if it were necessary, he would have the whole of County Limerick dug up to provide her ladyship with shamrock on St. Patrick's Day for sale on the streets of London and for dispatch to Irish soldiers and sailors on active service. The Countess, who was in London at that period, said that, for the first time since the Shamrock League started 15 years ago, they were organising street sales in London²³ and that they hoped to do a roaring trade. The receipts would be given to the various Red Cross buffets (pronounced bu-fe) that provided cups of tea to soldiers travelling to or from the front at railway stations. The Countess also opened a shop in Bond Street, just for St. Patrick's Day, to sell shamrocks.²⁴ By that time, the League had sent 125,000 sprigs of shamrock to London, where 1,000 ladies took part in the selling of the

shamrock on the streets and in some of the West End shops.²⁵ It is estimated that they took in between £1,500 and £2,000. "Considering that the whole thing was organised in 8 days, I think the results are wonderful," commented the Countess, to whose energy the scheme owed its success.²⁶

As St. Patrick's Day 1916 came around, the Countess opened a depot for the sale of shamrock at No. 9, Railway Approach, London Bridge, where, with her band of helpers, she neatly packed the shamrock for despatch to friends at home and to the soldiers at the front. The white and green coloured cardboard boxes that they were using were piled so high that they nearly touched the ceiling. While she worked, the Countess gave an interview to a reporter from the Press Association. She spoke enthusiastically of her labour of love as she filled box after box. "We are as busy as can be. This shamrock has come from my own gardens in Ireland, and some of it from the fair green fields of sweet Tipperary; and that reminds me of the splendid work which the ladies of Tipperary have done for the soldiers and sailors free refreshment buffets, which are to benefit by the sale (of shamrock). We have just opened a buffet at Limerick Junction, where in 10 days no fewer than 8,700 meals were served by the Tipperary lady helpers, who cheerfully came along in snow to wait upon the brave lads who pass through Limerick. The farmers of the neighbourhood have also generously supported the movement with gifts of milk, butter and other commodities. In addition to the buffet at Limerick, buffets have recently been opened at Kingstown and Kingsbridge" (Dublin).²⁷

By 1917, the Countess had left Ireland and was living at Hall Place, Bexley, in Kent. The following year, her 22-year-old son, Edmond, an R.A.F. pilot, was killed in aerial combat over the hills of France and Flanders. A few months later, in December, her daughter, Victoria, who

was married and living in America, also died. In 1920, the Countess was awarded the C.B.E. This was an award for people who had served in non-combat capacities during the First World War. The Countess's closing years were overshadowed by an infirmity resulting in permanent disability.²⁸ May Burke-Irwin Pery died on the 11th of March, 1943, six days before the day that she is most famously associated with.

It is here that we must end the story of the Shamrock League. It is not known how long the League lasted, but the idea of posting shamrock in boxes to relations and friends in foreign countries lasted for many years afterwards.

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