

THE TWO COOPERS OF LOUGH GUR

BY JIM KEMMY

Although Michael Hogan could hardly be regarded as Limerick's greatest poet, he wrote the city's most celebrated poem, 'Drunken Thady'. Born in 1832 in Thomondgate, on the north side of Limerick, he accorded himself the rather grandiose title, the Bard of Thomond. He earned his living as a mill labourer at the Lock Mills and the Newtown Pery Mills. He later worked for the Limerick Corporation, when he was employed as custodian of the bank of the Abbey River.

He wrote his best known work, "Drunken Thady", in his early twenties and it was published in 1867 in a collection of Hogan's verse, *The Lays and Legends of Thomond*. Almost all the other 160 poems in this book are now forgotten, but, after "Drunken Thady", "Garadh Earla and the Two Coopers" is well worthy of some study. The poem is a thoroughly Limerick work and is chockful of references to people, places, landmarks and historical happenings. The poem changes pace, mood and theme throughout its 445 lines of rhyming couplets. Although, unlike "Drunken Thady", there are a few ponderous passages in the work, it is a lively tale of natural humour and vitality.

Michael Hogan knew Lough Gur and its lore well. In his memoirs he wrote that while still a reluctant schoolboy he began "to haunt the pleasant banks of the Shannon where I fell in love with Nature while in her beauty. I found a higher and sweeter inspiration of Song. The enchanting remembrance of the glorious summer mornings and fairy evenings I spent along by the bright, blue, beautiful Shannon still lingers round me, like weird music, for it was there I conceived and embodied the *Lays and Legends of Thomond* ... I never tired of hunting up traditions. They possessed an overwhelming charm for me. I felt an especial fondness in visiting fairy forts, old ruined castles and abbeys, often sitting for hours among the weird shadows, bathing my imagination in the wildest poetic dreams". Later, Hogan found his regular Sunday rambles to the surrounding countryside a liberating contrast to the "interminable torture of the grinding of millstones" and the "impenetrable atmosphere of the mill" which he had to



Michael Hogan, the Bard of Thomond.

endure for six days a week for 16 long years.

In his youth the Bard was also a keen angler and fished many of the rivers and lakes of Limerick and Clare. His love of fishing is reflected in many of his poems. Indeed, in a footnote to the first poem in the *Lays and Legends of Thomond*, which

he based on a legend of Cullane Lake in Co. Clare, he wrote: "I was nearly deprived of the luxury of telling anything about it, as I narrowly escaped being drowned there one fine morning while on a fishing excursion. Its depth is very immense".

"Garadh Earla and the Two Coopers"

has some similarities to "Drunken Thady". Both works are based on legends. The city poem relates the exploits of a weaver named Thady during a day (Christmas Eve) "on the town", and culminates in his dramatic encounter with the ghost of the wife of the Church of Ireland Bishop, known as the "Bishop's Lady". The Lough Gur poem is an account of two coopers and their day's fishing on the lake during which they came into confrontation with the ghost of Garadh Earla, Gerald or Garrett Fitzgerald, the fourth Earl of Desmond. The coopers, Jim and Joe, had, according to local tradition, their workshop on the "banks of the Camogue, not far from Longford Bridge". It is likely that the Bard paused beside the bridge on his way to and from Lough Gur to reflect on the legends surrounding the spritly brothers. And he may well have mused on their tales and pranks as he sat by "the lone lake" waiting for his float to dip into the dark waters. It is also likely that the Bard used the dreams of the coopers in poem as a means of relating some of his own daydreams and political thoughts.

In the first verse the poem sets the festive scene and introduces the coopers:

*Once on a sunbright holiday,
Sometime, methinks, in June or May-
I cannot name the day exact,
Altho' my story is a fact-
Two coopers who, for months were
wishing
To spend some pleasant hours, in fishing,
Arose, with morning's earliest beam,
Glad in the prospect of their game.
If you require their names to know
I'll introduce them - "Jim and Joe" -
Two craftsmen of as gallant mettle,
As every used an adze or whittle.*

For all their skills, the brothers were not the most industrious coopers in Co. Limerick. Their workshop served as a kind of community centre for all the "prime boys" in the district:

*Their workshop was the sole resort
Of every wag that looked for sport;
And there the wildest tales were told
Of fairies, ghosts, and hidden gold.
With such wild legendary feasts,
Brave Jim and Joe regaled their guests;
And while the curious "yarns" were
spun,
Tubs, casks, and cans were left undone.
But if the listeners laughed or sneered,
At once a hostile scene appeared. For Jim
and Joe, with staves and cleavers,
Routed the clan of disbelievers.*

The poem then reverts to the early morning scene as the brothers prepare for their day's outing. Both men had awakened from wild dreams in which they had been swallowed whole by large fish from the Lough Gur waters. Although the Bard fills these dream sequences with tall stories and a variety of incredible adventures, Joe declares the dreams to be a good omen, as the coopers set out for the lake:

*Now for Lough Gur's blue flood they
steered,*

*For their day's humour, well prepared-
They carried fishing-rods, as strong
As a brig's topmast, and as long,
They bore a gaff whose strength of form
Might hold a gallery in a storm;
'Twas like the anchor of the Ark,
Or some great Cyclop's handi-work,
Designed for gaffing whale and shark.
To kill the fish, Joe brought a wattle,
And Jim secured a tight corked bottle
Of Stein's pure malt, whose spirit mellow
Would make a Stoic a loving fellow.*

Here the narrative is spiced with colourful flashes such as the poet's description of the boat:

*A well-built waterproof concern,
Close caulked and tarred from stem to
stern.*

But the fishermen were out of luck and, after all their elaborate preparations, their trawling pike-baits failed to tempt even a single "bite". They decided to retire to the shore for some sustenance, and to wait until sunset before resuming fishing. Hogan's account of the lakeside picnic is worth recalling:

*So they began to calculate,
After the day's expiring heat,
The finny tribe, like human sinners,
Might feel a whet to eat their dinners.
And, with this truthful hope inspired,
They waited 'till the sun retired-
Spread their repast, and exercised it,
And with the "drop" of malt baptised it.*

Next follows one of the most delightful and memorable passages in the poem, as Hogan describes nightfall on the lake:

*The sun went down with burning
blushes;
The song-birds sought the sheltering
bushes;
The corncrake commenced his croon,
And up the blue east stole the moon,
Large pitch-black clouds, with inky
fringe,
Gave the lone lake an ebon tinge;
The billows rolled with moanings drear,
Like suffering spirits in despair;
The gale blew with a sullen howl,
Shrill screamed with restless waterfowl;
Black grew the rayless brow of night,
As if the moon had lost her light.*

The coopers resumed their fishing, by now well fortified with spiritual refreshment. However, the luckless brothers were destined to land a far more spectacular and unexpected catch than they had ever encountered in their dreams. The vivid picture of Garadh Earla and his glittering crown is one of the highlights of this section of the poem:

*Midway upon the lake's dark breast,
The boat a moment seemed to rest,
As if some hidden thing of force,
Had stopped her in her drifting course,
The fisher leaned upon her side,
And looked into the deep, dark tide,
And saw an armed chieftain stand,
Beneath the waters, stern and grand;
His breast was clad with silver mail,
His limbs were sheathed in burnished
steel,
And a gold helmet, on his head,
Such burning rays of glory shed,
That all the brightest polished gems*

*Of Europe's kingly diadems,
Seemed in a blazing halo rolled
Around the ornamental gold.*

After he sighted Garadh's helmet Jim declared:

*If I can gaff it off his head,
Then, 'pon my oath! our fortune's made;
We'll be as rich as Jews or Quakers-
All Rothschild's fortune's in that hat-
More than would buy a million acres,
Landlords and all, and more than that.*

Here Michael Hogan gives expression to the general belief in Ireland of the time that Jews could make plenty of money without having to engage in manual labour, and that Quakers, because of their fine shops and houses, could never be poor.

In his attempt to snatch the helmet, Jim stuck his gaff in Garadh's ear. The enraged earl bursts through the surface of the water and again the Bard draws on the full range of his poetic powers and inventiveness, as he describes the helter-skelter chase across the angry lake amid a thunderstorm:

*The frightened coopers seized each oar,
And pulled like madmen for the shore,
While in a whirl of tide and wind,
The angry Spectre strode behind!
The lake against its banks rebelled
And o'er its sounding borders swelled;
The lightning blazed - the thunder rolled,
The woods grew mad - the tempest
howled -
The clouds around the sky were hurled,
Like smoke-wreaths of a burning world;
Each red flash, like a fiery snake,
Leaped on the storm's back round the lake,
Dancing the universal fling,
Upon the tempest's mighty wing,
The rain-god dashed his cloud-gates wide,
And downward plunged the aerial tide;
Proclaiming, with its awful sound,
How thus the ancient world was
drowned,
Dazzled with lightning - drenched with
rain,
They tug the heavy oars in vain.*

Eventually Garadh caught up with his quarry and, seizing the boat, hurled the coopers from the centre of the lake to the shore:

*Awhile, insensible as clay,
Amid the broken wreck they lay;
At last they 'rose, and stared about,
"By Jove!", says Joe, "our dreams are out!"*

The poem is a free-wheeling celebration of the lake, its legends and pleasures, and, of course, the coopers. The work is not meant to be taken too seriously, as Michael Hogan concedes in the last four lines:

*Now if this story's truth you'd know,
Go learn the tale from Jim and Joe!
But, if you seem to doubt one tittle,
They'll cleave your ear off, with a whittle!*

It is ninety-four years since the Bard's death, and his poem is now forgotten. He was a minor poet and, as already indicated, this work is not his best. However, the *Two Coopers* at least deserves a place in the annals of the waterways of his native county.