LIMERICK SOCIALIST

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'That which is good for the working class I esteem patriotic . . .' *James Connolly*

THE VOICE OF THE WORKER

FERENKA: WHAT NEXT?

Application for Membership

MARINE, PORT AND GENERAL WORKERS UNION

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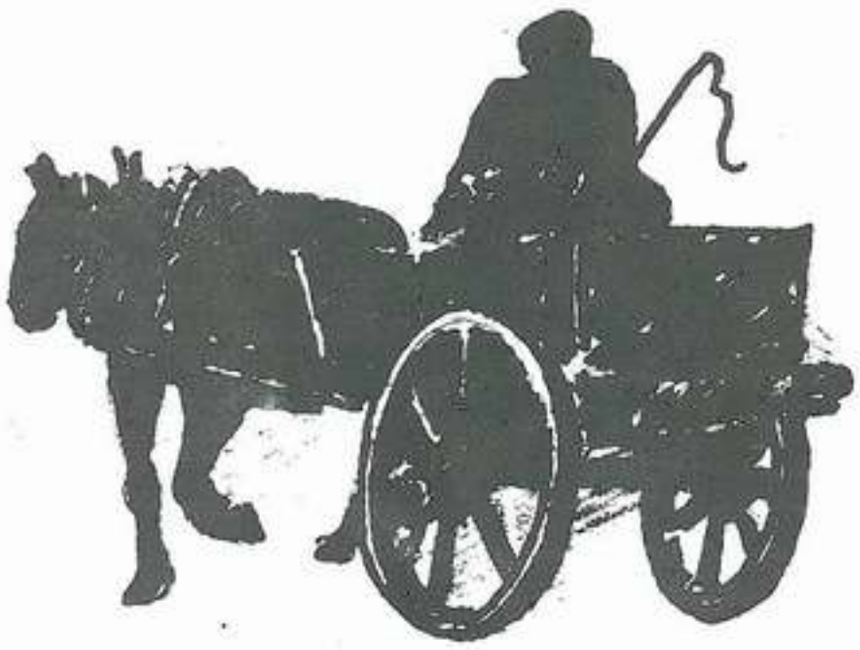
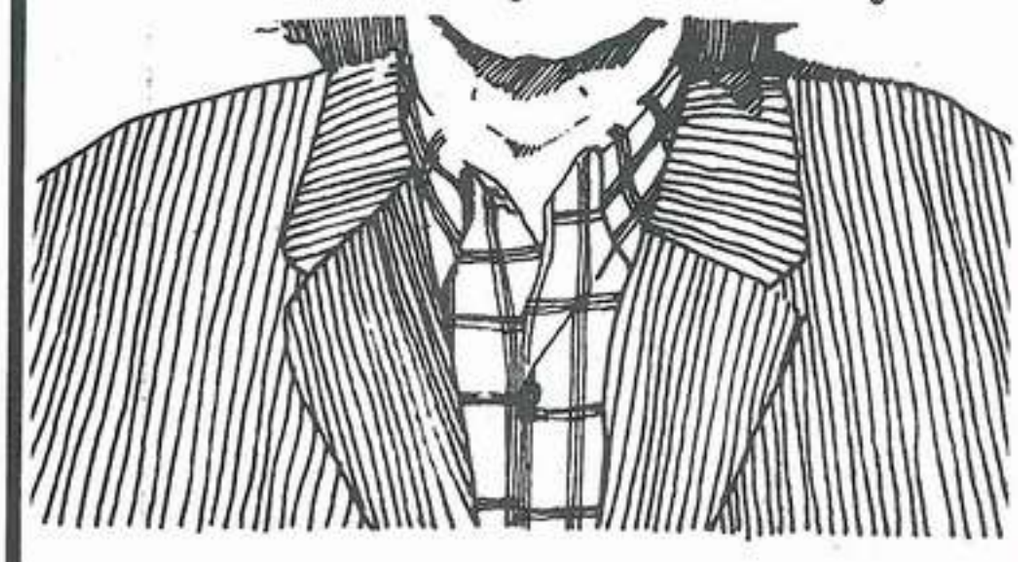
PARK



POEMS by John Liddy



THE IRISHTOWN

Let them eat butter!

BY DERMOT McEVOY

THE editor wanted my piece early for Christmas, 'a few light-hearted things that you do so well'. Butter me up would he? He should know better than to tempt me for, as Oscar Wilde said, 'I can resist anything except temptation'. Let's begin then with butter. A peep at the fridge tells me that my long-suffering wife has managed to secure, against the fierce competition of the distinguished Christians with which my neck of the woods abounds, a total of two 1lb packets of the George Colley—Paddy Lane Christmas butter at 29p a lb. This represents a saving of 48p on the normal, that is to say the abnormally high, price of the stuff needed to keep our farmers in petrol and porter.

Former Ferenka ex-workers, all of whom have, or should have, deep-freezers stuffed with boxes of butter, will have done proportionately better. Good luck to them, and to Mick Lipper who has been fighting so hard on their behalf without managing to get his name in the papers or his voice on the radio before those Dutchmen stopped paying wages to Irishmen out of the Irish taxpayers' bounty. (By the way, Dick Walsh of the *Irish Times* is the only reporter to put on record the fact that Ferenka, since its establishment, paid out £7 million in wages and that this is precisely the sum the taxpayers here gave to Ferenka in grants. The taxpayers, need I tell you, are you and I). Of course, the Irish taxpayer got quite a bit of the money back: the Ferenka workers paid Income Tax and they subsidised the farmer by paying 53p a lb. for butter. That's all over now.

And what will the Ferenka men do with the butter? Why they can spread it thinly on slices of costly bread and console themselves with the thought that unlike Christmas last year there is now a Government in power that is getting the country moving. I hope all this is light-hearted enough for my readers and for the Rev. Dr. James Good, who not only has been saying that he is a Socialist but that Christ was a Socialist. What will they be saying next! Possibly, heaven forfend!, that Dr. Newman is wrong. Worse, that the workers have been maliciously fooled and must now listen to the new Marie Antoinette, Maria Geoghegan Hyphen Quinn, saying in her £11,000 a year Gaeltacht blas, 'Let them eat butter!'

Sixty Christmases ago I was taken to Limerick station to meet my father returning home from Flangers on furlough. Over lemonade and jam cakes in the buffet he explained to me the nature and quality of the food they were getting in the trenches: 'If we had any ham, we'd have ham and eggs, if we had any eggs'. I was at Ennis before I'd sorted that one out. By then, under the influence of a few slugs from an evil-smelling bottle, he was actually singing, 'What do y'want for eggs and ham/When you've plenty bread an' jam/Ho, ho right turn, what d'ye do with the money you earn/Oh, oh, oh what a lovely war!'

Have things changed for the worker since? The Lords-Lieutenant have gone, the Cosgraves, father and son, De Valera and Lemass; Lynch the Hurler has been replaced by Lynch-the-thinking-man-smokes-a-Peterson-pipe and what have we got? Christmas butter! That is, if the Ferenka Home Assistance money runs to it.

I do not think that the worker deserves this treatment. But he will continue to be treated like dirt until he takes stock of himself. This needs resolution. It is not someone else's business to provide the resolution, to hand you social justice on a plate; it is *your* business. I recall sitting glumly in a working-class cafe at Tooting Bec scarcely able to think clearly after being up all night listening to election results that brought unexpected and devastating defeat to Harold Wilson in 1970. How would we all survive Selsdon Man and the awful Heath was the pain in the gut. A kindly woman, attractive too, leant across the table and said, 'Isn't it awful? But we must start fighting NOW!! This English reserve is largely a nonsense; it vanished under Hitler's bombs. The same sort of revolution can be won here: Limerick can still elect a Socialist, a man who'll be the standard-bearer for Socialism in the Republic. One day at a time for the alcoholic; one thing at a time for the Socialist: let that be the watchword. But I'm a long way from butter.

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TAKING one thing with another I've done well out of Fianna Fail. My Income Tax is several pounds a week less (though that may well be due to Richie Ryan's last budgetary effort) and I shall no longer have to pay £6 odd a week in rates. My wife, in due course, won't be paying Road Tax. Splendid stuff, yet I don't think it just; I'd still prefer a just society. Indeed, ungrateful fellow that I am, I still think I'd be just as well off if the taxation base was broadened to include Paddy Lane's men.

Indeed, it may be necessary soon to make all farmers pay Income Tax on their incomes just like everyone else. Perhaps Dr. Newman will tell us if that proposition is morally wrong? If the country is to provide subsidised jobs for the unemployed, the taxation base will just have to be broadened to include farmers for the simple reason that just now 87 per cent of the Income Tax collected comes from PAYE on wages and salaries: farmers pay next to nothing and a company like Esso, which sells its products all over the Republic, pays nothing by virtue of a little sleight-of-hand with the multinational books. In the event, we have to listen to Michael Killeen (£20,000 a year and massive expenses as head of the IDA) dismissing a possible workers' takeover of Ferenka – and being allowed get away with it by a sheephead reporter on RTE – by merely saying, 'Where would the workers' get £100 million?'. Why from the very same source that financed Ferenka in the first instance – the workers of Ireland through his own IDA and their taxes. That, or anything remotely as intelligent, is, of course, socialism, something Michael Killeen doesn't think is good for us.

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BISHOPS, especially bishops who want to drag a million screaming Orangemen into a Roman Catholic state, ought to try a vow of silence. But, of course, they are encouraged to talk up by politicians of all three main parties. We had the spectacle the other week of Garda Commissioner Garvey meekly handing over his authority to Bishop James Kavanagh. Men who were holding innocent shoppers hostage (that, of course, was not brutality) would not come out because they feared Garda brutality! So he let Bishop Kavanagh take over his simple duty and, inferentially, admit there is Garda brutality. I am prepared to support Bishop Kavanagh for Garda Commissioner when Garvey retires,. On the social level, why not Bishop Newman as Minister for Labour instead of Gene Fitzgerald? He could not do greater damage than some of the elected representative and might be a damn sight better than Zinky Fingers O'Malley, the other miserable Ferenka failure.

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LOOK around you this Christmas. What do you see? A knot of adventurers holding the country in thrall. They're not even competent adventurers; they piddle away with their own miserable schemes for making money at someone else's

poems

by JOHN LIDDY

ON BLINDNESS

For the blindman
Sitting
In a moving car
Darkness itself
Holds no fear

The danger lies
In what
The night brings
After the pubs
And the dance
Halls close
After the after
Hours

When the drunk
Takes control
Of the wheel.

A CHILD'S CRIME

Easily led
By cuter ten year olds
I pawned a book

Of herbal cures
Belonging
To my grandmother

Some old McCormack records
A first edition
Of Whitman's poems.

Ever since
I have been trying
To make amends –

Now that herbal cures
Are obsolete
McCormack seldom heard

Whitman out of print
Grandmother
Long since dead.

HOLY STONES

The Abbey stands with a promise
Made some thirty years or more
To restore her pre-Cromwell glory
By cleaning out the dung and
Putting stained glass in
The windy slits about the walls.

But stones vital for salvation
Were carried off and placed
In the gables of modern homes
So that the house and all within
Would be blessed and protected
By the holiness of martyred monks.

expense while the foundations of honesty and truth are cut from under the country. They are truly nobodies, leading us nowhere. They have the country hooked on their money nonsense: buy this, buy that, keep ahead of the Murphys!

An acquaintance of mine, a moneyed man, with just his wife to support (he has execrable taste in furnishings and there is not a book to be seen in his home) complained to me that the expensive dishwasher he'd ordered had arrived without a built-in water-softener. 'Send it back', I said, 'you don't need a dishwasher; there are only the two of you'. He was aghast, 'But we entertain', he spluttered. 'How often? How many friends have you got?', I went on. Well, he sent the dishwasher back. He has no friends. You don't buy them, you earn them. And they keep plugging away for you in the hardest of times. Where a friend is concerned it's Christmas every day for you.

Mind you, to survive a Christmas under Fianna Fail or Fine Gael one has to be, in George Santayana's phrase, something of a saint and something of a hero. Somehow we'll survive this shower.

I never have any problems with members of Fianna Fail or Fine Gael – the principal criminal conspiracies against the people. I pointedly refuse to know any of them. To my eternal shame I made the mistake, sometime in 1917 or 1918, of actually shaking hands with De Valera on his arrival at Ennis railway station after his East Clare election victory. I got a wallop for being out late that night, but I always like to think it was for actually having physical contact with that arch-enemy of the people. Association with bishops can only be a venial sin compared with that.

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JUST to set your teeth on edge, especially if you're a begrudger, let me tell you a true story, a true Christmas story. The chief egghead of Fianna Fail, Martin O'Donoghue, Minister for Economic Planning, is giving me, yes me, a Christmas present of more than £1,000. It's back pay. While I was working in a very minor capacity for a branch of RTE I was being paid £15 a day, now Martin Eaghead has conceded a union claim that my pay should have been more; no, not the 5 per cent more that you lot will have to be satisfied with, but £22 a day, which is nearly 50 per cent more! And they say the country's broke! I never looked for this rise. Will I be sending it back? – no, a thousand times no! How do I justify my acceptance of this bounty? – simple: as Lenin said, 'when you live among wolves you must howl like a wolf'; howl enough to scare an egghead anyhow.

Pity I can't join you in a Christmas drink. Or have one myself. That's the fly in the ointment. Or, if you like, no rose without thorn. Meanwhile, remember it is not 'peace on earth, goodwill to men' but, as I keep telling you, it's that entirely different proposition, 'peace on earth to men of goodwill' – and you won't find them among the sheepheads and eggheads this Christmas, or next Christmas either.

I shall be paying a little more for my *Limerick Socialist* this year, as in the nature of things there will be fewer opportunities, fewer Christmases on which I shall have the privilege to do so. Keep the flag, the Red Flag, flying!

THE IRISHTOWN

In response to requests from a number of our readers we publish below a chapter on the Irishtown by Kevin Hannan from his historical work in progress "Garryowen and Glory".

HOW THE PEOPLE LIVED

Space was at a premium when the city walls of Limerick were intact, and when they were demolished there was no great rush for the great open spaces. Room to live in was sorely limited, hence the cramped conditions in the warren of narrow, insanitary lanes that were the capillaries of the main arteries of the Irishtown – Blood Street, John Street and Mungret Street.

Some of the lanes were approached through archways or ordinary openings about the size of doorways, and were known as bows. The principal bows in the Irishtown were, Clampett's Bow, Kerry Bow, Hall's Bow, Wilkinson's Bow, O'Sullivan's Bow and Pike's Bow.

While some of the lanes and streets were cobbled the majority had earthen surfaces. All had channels, or, to be more precise, open sewers, running down their centres. In wintry conditions the earthen surfaces were churned into a gooey mess of pig manure and household slops. This fearful substance was usually dehydrated in the heat of the summer and disseminated through an atmosphere that could be almost cut with a knife.

During the latter half of the nineteenth century the Limerick Public Health Committee was fighting a constant battle with the incredible squalor of the old city, and particularly the Irishtown. The improvement in the waterworks towards the end of the century, the wider distribution of piped water, and the improvement in the drainage systems, saw the tide of the battle twin in favour of the Committee. Almost up to the turn of the century water for domestic use was still being drawn, in many cases, from wells and pumps, all of which were polluted to varying degrees.

In 1886, there was a serious outbreak of fever in the Industrial School attached to the Good Sheppard Convent. The report of the analyst who examined samples of water taken from the two pumps in the institution's grounds stated that ". . . the water received on 31st May is excessively hard, and excessively bad. I have seldom met with a so-called potable water which so closely resembles sewage". Water from other parish pumps was described as "turbid", "highly polluted", and "unfit for human consumption".

As late as 1889, the water drawn from the pump attached to St. John's Hospital was found to be "unfit for potable purposes".

This situation is remarkable when one considers that in the mid-1820's an elaborate scheme was launched by the Water-works Company to erect two large reservoirs at Gallows Green (on the site of the old Cromwell's Fort). These contained 600,000 gallons of water which was pumped from the Shannon by means of a 40 horse-power steam engine.

The public fountain in front of St. John's Cathedral was erected by the Pery Jubilee Committee in 1865, during the Mayoralty of John R. Tinsley, and proved of great benefit to the citizens. People came from many areas outside the Square to avail of the pure water, and at the same time engage in an interchange of gossip from the various districts.

A large number of water carriers were catered for here, as the fountain had four outlets, two for filling large vessels, and two fitted with iron goblets for on-the-spot drinking and the filling small vessels.

By modern standards life in the lanes and alleys of the parish was unbelievably uncongenial. The rearing of pigs, fowls, and donkeys in backyards, and sometimes even in kitchens, was widespread. An entry in the Health Committee Diary of 1884 refers to ". . . the state of Mrs. Spellacy's kitchen in Kerry Bow where she keeps a pig", and the fantastic situation in Black Bull Lane where Johanna Bourke ". . . kept a donkey, two pigs and a flock of poultry, in a back yard where the donkey had no room to turn about". Again we find an even worse situation in Cornwallis Street (now Gerald Griffin St.) where "James Ryan kept two pigs in a hole off the kitchen". A little further away, in Carr Street, we find a reference to ". . . the insanitary state of Thomas Ryan's house where he keeps pigs under the stairs".

In 1885 the Health Committee dealt with such matters as ". . . the state of James Punche's yard in Cornwallis Street . . . flooded with stagnant water and sewage", and ". . . a fearful smell from the boiling or rendering horse flesh in a premises in the Cabbage Market".

In those days the people were well used to smells, for the streets and lanes were rarely without heaps of manure and stagnant pools. The general condition of the city streets is summed up by Dr. Browne the Local Government Inspector, in 1891, when he reported on ". . . the filthy condition of the streets and lanes of the City . . . the ashes, house slops and manure being deposited in the public street. The sewers . . . are not properly trapped nor sufficiently ventilated. It will not be possible to keep the streets and laneways clean until each house is provided with running water, sanitary conveniences, and the means of disposing of house slops, etc."

The number of lodging houses in the parish during the nineteenth century is baffling. From the number of applications for registeration of lodging houses in the last quarter of the century one concludes that there were not less than sixty. This figure includes unregistered houses, many of

NOVEMBER SUNDAY

It is not that one prefers Green to Red
Or Red to Green. Through earth that is
Black and Red and Green – the slaughtered sing
their way; tra-la, tra-la through the roots of
Violets
Whose
Colours emboss the evening we crossed the hoary Thames
into Whitehall. (Crossing by boat and torch as
The Romans did). You took my hand and
pointed-out the spectred lights along the Mall
And in Whitehall
The white stalk based with wreathes was monument
Wreathes red and green
And Men in the dark full of rheumy-eyed seeing
(History is a cackle in old men's throats)
In that time my heart lies still
Repairing to watch in another part
For those who had come to march
'Against British Presence in Northern Ireland'
Staggling from Kilburn and Camden Town
So I can say now
'Leaving us transfixed between Harp and Crown
Or put another way – stuck between green and red
Only able to utter to a dawdling seller
(Had there been such?)
A Poppy – one for all the dead'.

KEVIN O'CONNOR

which operated despite the close surveillance of the Night Watch, whose job it was to report defaulters. The condition of some of these institutions, many of which were situated in the airless and sunless labyrinth of the Irishtown can best be left to the imagination of the reader.

Where did all the lodgers come from, and who were they? They were the vagrants, the wandering minstrels, the ballad singers and the beggars. Then we had the farm labourers who racked their bodies in the fields and gardens of the countryside for as little as two shillings a day. Like their vagrant friends, they weren't too particular about where they stretched their weary, limbs – they couldn't afford to be.

In the 1820's a certain street singer and beggar named Galvin was well known in the Irishtown. He was given little assistance from the people, and he could find lodgings nowhere. He slept in sheds and hallways around the parish and found enough food to keep body and soul together through the alms of the more charitable, whose compassion had been excited by his wretched condition. However, the people in general had no time for the executioner of Bold Robert Emmet.

An old school register, which came into the hands of the late Dick Naughton a few years ago, and on which he wrote a delightful article in the *Limerick Chronicle,* contained the following street names in and around St. John's parish:– Scabby Lane, Mass Lane, Scott's Lane, Goat's Lane, Williams's Lane, Bushy Lane, Monoghan Lane, Ball Alley Lane, Father Quin Lane, Garveys Lane, Sheehy Lane, Moloney Lane, Curry Lane, Hatter's Lane, Barrack Lane, Joshue's Lane, Jones's Lane, Moore's Lane, White Wine Lane, Forker's Lane, Repeal Alley, Pencil's Alley, Purcells Lane, Magdalen Lane, Town Wall and Black Bull Lane.

Many of these old places have vanished, and now their situations can hardly be traced by the oldest inhabitants.

In the same register the trades, or occupations of the fathers of the pupils were set out in a grand copperplate hand. They are worth recalling here. There were: Rag-gatherers, wheelwrights, tatchers, chandlers, coffi n - makers basket-makers, labourers, brass-founders, grave-diggers, fishermen, whip-makers, stage-keepers, dairy men, coopers, dyers, tailors, auctioneers, glaziers, weighmasters, blacksmiths, tinmen, varnishers, stonemasons, nailers, bootmakers, lastmakers, millwrights, snuffgrinders, slaters, fiddlers, candle-makers, cage-makers, pavers, lime-burners, pipers, woolcard-makers, bellows-makers, pipe-makers, soldiers, coachmen, car-makers and weavers.

Almost all these trades and callings, like those that followed them are now extinct, and the monies derived from the long and tedious practice of them allowed little or no indulgence in the luxuries of the day. It was a time when the terrible conditions of the worker was taken for granted. There were no trade unions as we know them today, no dole – no social welfare or unemployment benefits: there was nothing but the Poor House. There were many destitute souls whose pride would not suffer them to accept the "hospitality" of the "big house across the bridge": they preferred the slow death from starvation in their own hovels.

Pipe-making was carried out well into the present century. The Merrit family, of Broad Street, were probably the last of this fraternity. Whip-making, brush-making and agricultural carpentry were carried on up to recent years by the Barretts, the Sweeneys and the Smiths, respectively. Johnny Caulfield of Garryowen, carried on the most curious craft of all – he repaired broken crockery by stitching the pieces together. He usually worked on large dishes which were sometimes heirlooms in families. The stiching was done with soft steel wire through holes which were bored with great skill and patience. Most of his work was brought in by hopeful owners, to the firm of Goodwins, by whom Johnny Caulfield was mainly engaged.

Jim Walsh, in his "blessed retirement", still carries the banner of the cage-makers. In his old world shop in John Street Jim, who has also written poems on the romance of Plassey and Doonass, fashions the most exquisite bow cages. Indeed, he can still make a cage, to any specification, for any type of cage bird. This little part-time industry is a living link with a byegone age.

Like their brethern in the Englishtown, the nailers of the Irishtown were a hard-worked, ill-paid fraternity. They worked mostly in cellars and were very badly rewarded for their arduous labours. The last of the nailers in Limerick was Andy Herbert, from old Clare Street. Andy, who had fine literary tastes, and was well read, died in the late thirties, having almost reached the century.

Before 1837, when an English firm, the United General Gas Company, was set up in Watergate, there was no street lighting other than that provided in the three main streets by the feeble glimmering of oil lamps or waxtapers through the windows of the dingy shops. Oil lanterns were provided at some busy corners, but generally the gloom of winter was almost complete. The distribution of the gas was slow, but gradually the lamps and lanterns gave way to open gas jets (mantles were still unknown). Gas was sold at fifteen shillings per one thousand feet, and though it was generally felt that this charge was excessive the firm enjoyed a monoply for many years.

The citizens finally applied the only effective remedy for the high charges by forming the Citizens Gas Company. This concern sold gas for five shillings per thousand feet – a third of the existing charges. This measure speedily reduced the charges of the United General Gas Company to a like figure.

In due course, the Corporation purchased the interest of the Citizens Gas Company, and in 1778 a resolution was passed at a Corporation meeting to purchase the United Company's works with a view to the amalgamation of both plants. In pursuance of this scheme a Bill was drawn up and introduced to the House of Commons, where it was duly made the subject of a Committee of the House and finally passed.

There were many in the C rporation at that time who felt that the venture was a gamble that afforded them only a poor chance of success, for the threat f electricity, as a superseding agency was on everybody's lips. In November 1878, the following announcement appeared in the local press:–

Electric light, with Siemens patent apparatus, will be exhibited at the Rink on every Monday, Wednesday and Saturday, commencing Saturday, the 30th. inst., from 7.30 to 10.00 a.m. Admission 1/– skates free. Engine and machine room free.

The Forresters' Band will attend.

Arrangements have also been made for a grand fashionable exhibition commencing on Saturday, 30th inst., and every Saturday until further notice, from 4.30 to 6.30 p.m. to afford ladies and gentlemen living at a distance from the City an opportunity of seeing the electric light without the inconvenience of staying late in town. Admission 1/–, skates 6d. A Military Band will attend.

After this exhibition, and with the widespread interest in the new and revolutionary method of illumination, the members of the Corporation felt that they had backed a loser by taking control of the Gasworks. However they had burned their boats and accepted responsibility for an undertaking that has served the people well right down to the present day.

All through the last century crime was at a far lower level than it is today. Though the stygian blackness of the city afforded cover and sanctuary for every type of criminal, the penalties attendant on conviction were so severe, and so rigorously applied, as to deter even the most desperate. Indeed the times were so depressed that there were many in desperate straits, some of whom were forced by their abject poverty to take chances; if caught they were punished with draconian penalties.

There is the disgraceful case of the poor woman who was sentenced to seven years transportation beyond the seas. Her only crime was the larceny of a few ounces of sugar from a shop in Mungret Street.

On the whole the people lived in less fear of vandals and thugs than they do today. In many ways society has come a long way but the savage instincts of some people have not benefited from the enlightening effects of a more congenial and civilised way of life.

Ferenka: What's next?

A LESSON FROM HOLLAND

Since the closure of the Ferenka plant the Government has apparently accepted the situation that the only means of re-opening the factory will be through the introduction of another multi-national steelcord company. The trade unions, the strike committee, the Limerick Council of Trade Unions and the workers themselves have also come to accept this position. Meanwhile, so the story goes, there is nothing further to be done except hope and wait.

In response to a call from the Marine Port and General Workers' Union, the workers who had occupied the factory in the week after its shutdown left the plant without receiving any assurances about its future. So the unemployed workers have lost whatever initiative they had built up and are now relying on the Government and the efforts of the Industrial Development Authority to get them back their jobs. This attitude is in complete contrast with the action taken by the workers employed in another AKZO plant in Holland in September 1972 when the company tried to close the factory. The strike at Enka Fibres plant, the company's Dutch subsidiary, lasted for only six days (from Monday to Saturday), but the end results of this and the Ferenka strike were totally different. An account of the Dutch strike, written at the scene of the action at Breda by John Lambert, appeared in the *Sunday Times* on September 24th, 1972. The article titled, *Dutch Sit On To Success*, stated:

AT 9 O'CLOCK yesterday morning, to cheers from the local population, 452 workers marched proudly out of the Enka Fibres plant which they had been occupying since mid-day on Monday. They had not only saved their jobs, but had also made industrial relations history in Europe for their occupation, backed by a strike in Germany, had forced multi-national giant AKZO to reverse its decision to close down plants in Germany and Belgium as well at the Breda factory. AKZO gave way although they had maintained since last April that the plants were doomed because of over-capacity on the European market.

The Breda workers – 75 Belgians, 17 Spaniards, an Englishman, the rest Dutch – had won in under a week what five months of negotiating by the unions in three countries had failed to wring from AKZO. The company's decision, which threatened 5,700 of their 100,000 workers, was announced out of the blue last April, without prior talks with the unions. It represented a chance to get out of an area of the artificial fibres market where AKZO was making big losses because of the chronic over-capacity all over Europe. The news was released the day after the European Commission had fined the companies for a cartel in the sector. The unions insisted on talks, which have been going on ever since, locally, nationally and even internationally.

It was a new deadlock in the Dutch talks that sparked off the occupation, which was surely the best organised, the most peaceful – and the most successful the Continent has yet seen. A group of six shop stewards and union officials started planning it the previous Thursday night. By Sunday they had 52 key workers at a secret meeting. They went into action at 13.50 on Monday, and when the manager got back from lunch the gates were shut. A works meeting produced massive support: the mood after five months of suspense was "this can't go on".

When the news reached the ENKA–Glanzstoff plant at Barmen, near Wuppertal, on Tuesday, the 1,400 workers there acted immediately with a different formula: the shifts relayed each other round the clock in the plant, but only two non-stop lines were kept running.

With legendary Dutch obstinacy, and the funds of the Chemical Workers Unions behind them – strike pay in Breda was £4 a day – the workers were all set for a long siege. Everything was organised to the tiniest detail. Under a strict rule, everyone had to get six hours sleep a night. All the workers under 21 had been sent home. The medical service was running. So was he telephone exchange. And there was even a local clergyman on the site. Journalists visiting the plant on Thursday had to go through strict controls.

By Wednesday night the Dutch Government was trying to mediate. With an election campaign just beginning, the last thing the Conservative coalition wanted was a conflict like this in the headlines for several weeks. On Wednesday the Breda workers' wives marched through the capital and got themselves on national TV with the slogan: "Today it's us. Tomorrow it'll be you".

The workers' position was that they would not budge without a commitment that all the threatened plants, not just the Dutch one, would be kept open. AKZO tried to play it tough, but a board meeting on Thursday changed course abruptly and gave the commitment. With disarming frankness, they said it would cost them money, but that it was worth it because all the attention Breda was getting was disturbing work in the rest of the company.

The occupiers played it cool and waited until Friday morning to hear a report from the unions, who had been with the AKZO board. Only then did they leave the plant, and production was due to start up again at the week-end.

What AKZO will do with the Breda plant, part of which is only a year old, and which can produce on its own a major part of the current surplus, is still not clear and will not be for some time. But both the Breda occupiers and the AKZO board have set precedents that are going to have a big impact all over Europe.

The strike and its effects were also considered in an article in *Chemical Age International*, in its edition of 29th September, 1972. Headed, *Enka Sit-in Forces–AKZO To Reverse Decisions On Plant Closures*, it read:

The occupation, fully supported by the Labour unions, was unique in Dutch history. The employees were impatient of the endless discussions concerning the reorganisation plan and wanted to show the board, the government and the Dutch people that their discontent was also directed against a society which enabled large concerns to manipulate the workers and their interests. The unions, who led the occupation, have now started discussions with AKZO in which the Dutch ministers of social and economic affairs will mediate. The occupation, carefully planned and carried out with great speed and precision, was supported by all 1,500 employees of which several hundreds locked themselves into the plant. Employees of other AKZO companies supported their colleagues in Breda . . . The decision by the AKZO group not to close five plants in Holland, Germany and Belgium has resulted in strong pressure on the E.E.C. to limit investment and production capacity in polyester fibres.

AKZO has subsidiaries and associated firms in America, Brazil, Holland, Belgium, Spain, France and Sweden. Ferenka was the firm's most important plant for the production of steelcord for tyres, although it also has a plant in West Germany which supplies the same product.

A number of people from the middle management section of the Ferenka factory, calling themselves "Group 40", have come together and drawn up detailed proposals to operate the factory on an economic basis. This is a positive contribution. But the unemployed production workers must not sit back and wait for something to happen. They must exert all the pressure that 1,000 men and their families can muster to ensure that the factory is re-opened as quickly as possible. This demand must be the main consideration of the workers and their unions.

HUNTING THE WREN IN PARK

The Parkmen could not allow themselves the luxury of a rest even during Christmastide. But the most important and strenuous event in their festive activities had nothing to do with their daily work. Though the Wren's Day is still regarded as a special occasion throughout the country, in Park it had a significance all its own. The market gardeners had little time to waste on birds all around them during the rest of the year but for two days the wren dominated their thinking. But this was no celebration of the little bird's triumph over the hostile elements. No, for the Parkmen at this time the only good wren was a dead one.

So, on the morning of Christmas Day men of all ages would gather to hunt the wren. About twenty Lower Parkmen would meet at the Bun Ard, come rain, frost or snow. A similar number from Rhebogue and Singland assembled at Singland Cross. All were well fortified against the wintry conditions. Each man was armed with two stout wattles. The quarry was one of the frailest and most inoffensive of all birds, a miracle of symmetry and song, whose gossamer feathers are arrayed in a beautiful pattern on the tiny body. This was the wren, 'the king of all birds', which was to forfeit its life on this Christian day of all days.

The charm of the little bird, with its cheerful winter warblings, was no protection against the grim, determined horde. The Parkmen treated their primeval mission with deadly seriousness. The wren must be hunted and killed today, for tomorrow only its dead body could confirm the *bona fides* of the wrenboys. The tuneful claim, "we followed the wren three miles and more . . ." must not be shown to be an idle one. Their fathers hunted and killed the wren, as their fathers did before them, back through the generations of two thousand years. As the "perfidious" Jews were once accused of another crime, so the wren was branded and hounded as the betrayer of St. Stephen to his persecutors. Thus it was ordained that this bird must always suffer on Christmas Day, so that its body could be gloated over and the first martyr revenged on the saint's feastday.

With all the summer songsters long silent, and only the lonesome robin to harmonise with, the wren unsuspectingly poured out its "thimbleful" of melody, but on this day the birdcall excites no thoughts of admiration or sympathy in the eager hunters; it only served to betray the wren's whereabouts and bring the wrath of the Parkmen on its head.

The itinerary of the journey over the traditional hunting-grounds never varied. The Bun Ard contingent moved off towards the "Bottoms", remorselessly beating every hedge on the way. Moving downstream from the water meadows of the Shannon Fields, the men passed the tail of Bealavunna, along the river draughts of Swan, Feehib and Poulahurra, crossed the Pike Bridge to the high ground of Athlunkard, before entering the broad plain of Clouncaree, with its long hedges sloping up from Altabugga and the "Heights and Hollows" to the "Range" and the Bog Road. The hunt went on through Annabeg and usually came to an end at Gillogue, whence, after some seasonable refreshment, the weary, sated Lower Parkmen returned home by the easier route of Plassey Bank.

The Singland Cross posse traversed the valley of the Groody river, taking in the sloping hedges of Kilbane, only pausing to say a prayer at the holy well of St. Mary Magdalen, the patroness of the parish. The fields around the Bloodmill were finecombed, and the force then swept on through Towlerton and "Maags", where thirsts were slaked and strategies reviewed. After this rest, the homeward journey was made by the old Singland Road.

During the hunt ten or twelve men lined up in formation on each side of the ditch and methodically beat the bushes. At times, when wrens were scarce, the pursuit took on the appearance of a military operation, with the party deployed on two flanks, a scouting group and a rearguard. Once the victim was "raised" there was no let-up. "God help any little wran that showed his little head", one shamefaced, old Parkman recounted in 1976. While a younger man might sometimes attept a solo, haphazard effort in trying to make an individual kill, the exercise was, invariably, a well-ordered one. Teamwork was the rule of the day, with the word of command being given by an older experienced leader, who saw that the time-honoured tactics were followed to the letter.

The wren's range of flight, being in proportion to its size, was never far, fast or high enough to put a distance between itself and its enemies. If it escaped the first barrage of flying wattles, it could only flit in short, fitful spurts along the hedge, or to an adjoining thicket. And its movements were always followed by the deadly, well-trained eyes of the Parkmen. Flushed out again and again, amid the thunder of half-crazed yells, to run the gauntlet of the murderous wattles, the tiny creature's flights became shorter and shorter. The men relentlessly closed in on the terrified bird until it could no longer fly through sheer exhaustion. One more furious fusillade and the wren was finally released from its terrible terror. The ritual went on until about four o'clock in the afternoon, when usually two or three wrens would have been killed by each group.

The number of birds killed varied from year to year, the decisive factor being the nature of the weather in the months before Christmas. A hard, cold winter with a lot of frost meant that even the hardy wren would be weak and hungry from the sheer struggle for survival. After a brief flurry of low flights, the worn-out bird became completely exhausted and, having been driven to a standstill, was a sitting target for the hunters. On such a day five or six wren would be done to death with the crashing wattles. A mild winter saw the wren in sprightly condition and difficult to corner. But the Parkmen were not easy to shake off and would be loath to give up the chase until at least one bird had been killed.

The Christmas Day outing was also fraught with some danger for the Parkmen themselves. The drains that abounded in their bailiwick claimed many casualties over the years, and it was not unusual to see a bedraggled hunter, soaked from the waist down, trudging his waterlogged way along the road home. Most of the men bore the scratches of briar and hawthorn on their faces and hands – the price of retrieving fallen wattles from bramble jungles. But, what matter? 'Twas Christmas Day and these trifles were soon forgotten at the festive table. The tired Parkmen were happy with their handiwork, and the old tradition had been kept alive for another year.

On the following morning of St. Stephen's Day one of the wrens would be dressed up in brown paper, scalloped around the dead bird, and surrounded by ivy. The men would then paint and disguise themselves in wrenboy clothes and set off from door to door "collecting for the wren". Even when the practice of "collecting" was discontinued, Parkmen still hunted and killed the "king of all birds" right up to recent times. The event was more a tribal custom than the deliberate and conscious act of annually avenging the death of St. Stephen by killing his reputed betrayer, the hapless wren.

The above article is a chapter from "The Park Danes", a study of Park and its people, by Patsy Harrold and Jim Kemmy, to be published in book form next year.

THE FERENKA FILE

We are aware that in calling all to a prayer meeting we may give the impression that we are opting out of our responsibility as human beings to work for the solution of a human problem.

We have called all to pray, not that God would give us a solution but that all involved may be given the vision, the courage and the capacity to work for one.

If there is to be lasting industrial peace in Ferenka all involved must learn to work together in a spirit of mutual respect, forgiveness and harmony.

There is in the Ferenka situation a mystery which no science, no sociology, no economic law can penetrate, no statistics calculate; it is the free will which the Creator has given to each person involved. And it is at this depth that the mystery of God's action and grace come into play and, in the last analysis, it is at this depth that the destiny of Ferenka will be decided.

All involved in the dispute need light to enlighten the intelligence, strength to sustain the will, courage to break out of entrenched positions and a sincere and genuine love of one another.

We know well that in the end it will be the people involved in Ferenka who will bring about a solution there. We pray that that solution may be a headline for the nation.

In calling people to pray we are touching on the unfathomable mystery of God's government and man's freedom. For that reason we do not oversimplify the problem.

(Press release by Fr. Jim Power, C.S.S.R., a co-ordinator of the Renewal Movement in Limerick, 9/11/1977).

24th October, 1977

MR. GENE FITZGERALD, T.D.,
MINISTER FOR LABOUR,
DEPARTMENT OF LABOUR,
MESPIL ROAD,
DUBLIN 4.

Dear Minister,

I have discussed with my National Executive Council your letter of the 21st instant and enclosure regarding the position in Ferenka in Limerick and we all appreciate your interest in the matter.

Like you, we are very concerned about the future of the plant and of the workers employed in it. We are anxious to assist towards an early and full resumption of work. However, what we can do must be consistent with the facts of the situation which we set out very briefly as follows:—

(1) There is no industrial dispute between this Union and Ferenka.
(2) All our clerical, technical and supervisory members are at work. So too are a number of our production members. We are satisfied that many others have not reported for work because of intimidation, fear or misunderstanding.
(3) In no way is this Union or its members at work preventing a full resumption of work. On the contrary, we are continuing to exert every effort to effect such a full resumption.
(4) We shall continue to represent and accord service to our members in the plant in accordance with their and our rights under the Constitution of this State and with the rules and regulations of the Union and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions.

It is a matter of regret to us that despite the facts of the situation the media and many prominent public personages continue to represent the impasse in Ferenka as resulting from an inter-union dispute. This is no so and has never been so. The dispute is the direct result of the action of the management of Ferenka in suspending seven workers.

Consistent with these facts, we are prepared to discuss the matter with you at any time if you feel that this would serve any useful purpose. We repeat, however, that there is no industrial dispute between this Union and Ferenka and that we are already doing everything in our power to effect an early and full resumption of work.

In view of the major adverse effect your proposals would have on the whole position of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, we are asking that body to consider the matter forthwith.

YOURS SINCERELY,
FINTAN KENNEDY,
GENERAL PRESIDENT,
IRISH TRANSPORT & GENERAL WORKERS' UNION.

Around the Bend

THE C.I.A.

The C.I.A., in a statement issued from the agency's headquarters in Washington D.C., claims to have unearthed a plot to infiltrate, disrupt and ultimately discredit the Irish section. The statement read:

Our Irish office has discovered a plot remarkable in its simplicty and conception to destabilise it and to seriously damage the international image, reputation and efficiency of the foremost organisation in the free world in its fight against subversives throughout the world. The chief conspirators are the members of the National Executive of Sinn Fein of 30 Gardiner Place, Dublin. The plot springs from the republicans ability to make moribund organisations, groupings and associations. A brief glance at their history shows their capacity as a destabilising force amongst organisations.

The established organisations listed by the Dublin office are: The Dublin Housing Action Committee, The National Land League, The Small Farmers Defence Association, N.A.T.O., The Left Alternative, The Irish Republican Socialist Party, The People's Democracy, The Resources Protection Campaign, Conradh na Gaeilge, The Left Liaison Committee and the Wolfe Tone Society. Facing such a formidable adversary we have no alternative but to warn our agents and our European offices of a planned campaign by the Shinners to infiltrate the American Central Intelligence Agency.

The C.I.A's statement went on to state that it was in the business of causing splits and making disunity and that it did not want any rivals, especially in holy Ireland. The document concluded with a quote from Brendan Behan on the propensity of Sinn Fein to split. The statement claimed that at the end of a meeting, held in Dublin in the late forties, to form a new republican party, Behan stood up and proposed the formation of a breakaway group on the grounds that an early split would save time and trouble later on.

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