



Little is known to me about the early life of my grandfather Patrick Riordan. I never knew him personally, as he died some years before I was born and indeed before the marriage of my parents. Our family tradition tells us that he was a man of small stature but of great heart and determination. The many newspaper reports which appeared at the time of his death record him as: "A man distinguished for his straight forward singleminded and upright disposition, beloved by his family and those intimately associated with him for his invariable kindness and gentleness in words and act". (Extract from the resolution of sympathy proposed before an adjournment of the City Council by the mayor of Limerick John Kerr). Another press report described him as "One of the most unassuming of men, justly held in estimation of his simplicity and his integrity of character (*Dublin Evening Herald*).

The year of my grandfather's death was 1907 and, according to the inscription on his memorial card, he was then 75 years old, so it is a matter of simple arithmetic to determine that the year of his birth was 1832. It is difficult to realise that there are still among us some senior citizens whose lives could have overlapped his by a few years, so long ago does it all seem. In 1832, Catholic Emancipation had been on the statute book for only 3 years. It was the age of Daniel O'Connell, poverty was widespread, the tithe proctor was on his rounds, and the terrible Famine of 1845 was thirteen years away.

My grandfather was the third child of Matthew and Ellen Riordan. Matthew Riordan had come into the city of Limerick from Caherconlish, where the name of Riordan or O'Riordan is still to be found. The late Maurice Riordan, the founder of the firm of Riordan Travel Agency, once told me that his father had also migrated to the city from Caherconlish, thus establishing a lasting bond between us.

My grandfather appears to have had a good education. His copperplate handwriting and his interest in literature and cultural pursuits bear witness to this. However, at an early age he was apprenticed to the oil and colour business. Being a small lad, he had to stand on a blacking-box behind the counter to serve the customers.

Towards the end of February 1862, the following notice appeared in the *Limerick Chronicle*: "Marriage - in St. Johns Cathedral, Mr. Patrick Riordan, Oil and Colour merchant, to Ellen, daughter of Mr. Timothy Lane, Pawnbroker, Broad Street".

Pawn-broking appears to have been a popular and probably a lucrative business at that period, and quite a number

# A 19th CENTURY CITIZEN

by Anthony Riordan

of prominent Limerick families trace their roots to it. I well remember the friendship which existed between our family and the O'Brien family of High Street and Thomondgate and the Clifford family of Broad Street, well known in musical circles in Limerick. Both were in the pawn-broking business. My great-grandfather Timothy Lane was, apparently, well thought of and seems to have been comfortably off. His wife, my great grandmother, whose maiden name was Moloney, was of a farming family in the neighbourhood of O'Briens Bridge. One of her sisters was married to a Mr. Kelly, an extensive farmer in Tipperary, and another to a Mr. Cullen, a businessman and merchant of Newport, also in Co. Tipperary. My grandmother Ellen Lane Riordan was a kindly lady, educated according to the Victorian ideas for "young ladies", which included being quite a competent pianist. She pre-deceased my grandfather by many years, dying when her children were quite young. Of the ten children of my grandparents' marriage (six sons and four daughters), one of the sons became a solicitor and another a doctor. The fourth son Patrick, after a brilliant academic career, was for many years Professor of Classics of Knockbeg College, Carlow, before returning to Limerick to take over the management of the family business. He was my father.

Of the four daughters, three died in infancy, while the fourth, my Aunt Katie, who was also my godmother, was the longest lived member of the family. She died in August 1944, after a life devoted to religious and charitable activities.

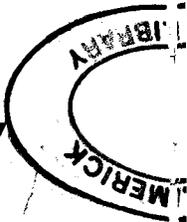
By the time of his marriage, my grandfather had set up his business as an oil and colour merchant and chandler at 27 William Street, at the Sign of the Golden Key. As was customary at the time, the family lived in the spacious residence overhead. Family life

was also typical of the period. My grandparents worked hard at their business, which became quite prosperous as time went on. The household included my grandfather's mother, who lived with the family until her death in the 1890s. It also included her faithful companion Kate, who remained with the family until her death.

Education was regarded as of great importance for advancement in life, and the Riordan family was no exception to this rule. The sons went to the Christian Brothers, then, as now, in Sexton Street, moving up from there to the Crescent College, while the three "professionals" were sent to the University College, at Stephen's Green in Dublin. The surviving daughter studied at Laurel Hill, at that time a comparatively new educational establishment.

An important interlude in the year was the family holiday in Kilkee, which then meant a journey down the river to Cappagh and thence by "long car" to Kilkee. On arrival there was a foregathering with their friends of the other merchant families, for then, as now, Kilkee was "Limerick by the sea".

It must have been about the late sixties or early seventies of the last century that my grandfather became interested in politics. At a time when the promotion of the national aspirations of Ireland swung like a pendulum between armed insurrection and constitutional agitation, he chose the latter course. As a member of Limerick Corporation for a long number of years, first as borough councillor, and later as alderman for the Markets Ward, he was one of the first members of the Isaac Butt Home Rule Committee. Later, when Butt was succeeded by Charles Stuart Parnell, he threw all his support behind "The Uncrowned King". At a meeting of citizens in 1880, he was the seconder of a motion to confer the Freedom of the City of Limerick on Par-





Patrick Riordan in his mayoral robes and chain.

nell. Again, to quote from his obituary notice in the *Evening Herald*, "He was indeed a personal friend of Mr. Parnell, by whom he was highly regarded".

Over the years, my grandfather, in addition to being vice-chairman of the Board of Guardians, was a member of the Land and National Leagues.

He took a prominent part in the Amnesty Movement, to agitate for the release of political prisoners, mostly Fenians, who were subjected to inhuman and degrading treatment in British jails. One of these was the Limerick Fenian John Daly, and when, at length, he was released he became our next door neighbour, setting up a bakery business at 26 William Street. This association between the Fenian and the Parnellite was the beginning of a friendship between the members of the respective families which happily still endures.

In the later decades of the nineteenth century the Limerick Corporation was largely composed of members of the professional and merchant classes. This was due to the electoral system which then obtained. Meetings took place on weekday afternoons.

Of those who were my grandfather's friends and colleagues in the municipal life of the city, there are many that deserve more than a passing reference. These men served the Limerick of their day and their careers and activities give us an interesting picture of what local society was like.

One such citizen was Thomas Gaffney a flour merchant, of Upper William Street, and a close friend of my grandfather. In later years, his son James and grandson Niall were prominent in the legal profession, while another son Thomas St. John Gaffney made history by becoming a brilliant diplomatic representative of the United States of America in the city of Dresden in Germany, during the early years of

the First World War. Here he met and befriended Roger Casement, who was then in Germany on his ill-fated attempt to set up an Irish Brigade.

Gaffney himself was, apparently, quite a character and given to expressing himself in his own style of verse. One Christmas, the following greeting arrived at my grandparents' home. "Happy Christmas to Riordan Pat, wife family and all, that dwell in his happy home where T.G. doth often roam".

Thomas Gaffney was also famous as a patron of Michael Hogan, the Bard of Thomond, some of whose works were published at his expense, in return for which he was adulated in poetry and prose by the poet.

My grandfather was not so fortunate. In common with many other prominent citizens, he incurred the ire of the famous poet, who lampooned him in a verse entitled "Patriotic Pat", the words of which have, unfortunately, been lost from our family archives for some years. All I can remember are the first two lines:

*"I'm a man of oils and colours  
and I glorify the gullers".*

It was said of my grandfather that he was on good terms with everybody, even his political opponents. Evidently, the Bard of Thomond was an exception.

Just over a century ago, in 1884, the historian Maurice Lenihan was mayor of Limerick. His successor was Stephen O'Mara of a family well known in the political, commercial and cultural life of the city, one of whose members was Joseph O'Mara, the famous operatic tenor. Stephen O'Mara was also a member of the Westminster Parliament for the Irish Party led by Parnell. He lived into the first quarter of the present century and became a senator of the Irish Free State. His son, also Stephen, took part in the War of Independence and, in 1922, became mayor in succession to George Clancy, mur-

dered in March of that year. Michael Cusack, related by marriage to the O'Mara family, well known painting and decorating contractor, was also mayor of Limerick, as was Francis O'Keefe, a solicitor, who, like Stephen O'Mara, was for a time a member of parliament.

The business community of William Street gave several members to Limerick Corporation. Patrick Herbert was a boot and shoe merchant at 17 William Street. David Begley owner of a wine business at 36 William Street. Bryan O'Donnell and William Nolan, both flour merchants, became mayors, O'Donnell in 1893 and 1894, and Nolan in 1896. Both of these men survived well into the 20th century and died at advanced ages. William Nolan, a man of culture, became town clerk, a post which he held with distinction until about 1930. He was in every sense a true gentleman. Bryan O'Donnell died at the age of 90 in the late 1930s. He was for many years chairman of the committee of Limerick Race Company. A name-sake, William O'Donnell made history in being elected to the mayoralty in 1890, at the age of 25 years, having previously held the office of high sheriff. Unfortunately, he died just 3 years later at the age of 28. His family had been the proprietors of St. Francis Abbey Tannery and were prominent in the business life of the city. Later they had a premises at 2/3, Upper Gerald Griffin Street, afterwards occupied by Messrs. R. & J. O'Dwyer, builders' providers, and now in a very dilapidated state. The O'Donnells also had their retail leather shop at 42 William Street, under the management of John Hayes, who is still hale and hearty.

These were some of the citizens with whom my grandfather was associated when he was elected to the office of mayor in 1891. As he took office in January of that year, he must have felt apprehensive at the state of things in Ireland. The unfortunate Parnell split had taken place only a month earlier and Ireland was plunged into dissension. It was no doubt due to his personal regard for Parnell that my grandfather took the Parnellite side, at that time not the most popular course to adopt. When Parnell had come to Limerick some 10 years previously, the entire population seemed to come out to greet him. Now when he returned only a small group of about 6 people, headed by my grandfather, stood on the platform at the station when Parnell stepped down from the train.

John Reddan, a well known personality who died some thirty years ago, was then a member of the Boherbuoy Band. He used to tell of Parnell's last meeting at Limerick, at which my grandfather presided. The meeting was addressed from an open, upstairs window in Cruise's Hotel and, according to Reddan, Parnell's first words



*William Street in the 1900s.*

were "Where is the Boherbuoy Band?" Whereupon the band members identified themselves by holding aloft their instruments. Apparently, Parnell became very impassioned as he addressed the gathering and had to be restrained by some of the stewards who feared that he might be in danger of falling from the window. This was Parnell's last appearance in Limerick. On August 17th, 1891, he wrote to my grandfather from Morrisson's Hotel in Dublin regarding the setting up of a new daily and evening paper to support his policies, informing him of a meeting to be held on the following Thursday. "May I hope that in giving me your assistance in considering this matter it may be convenient for you to meet me here on that day at 3 o'clock".

But the end was a tragedy. In less than two months, Parnell was dead, worn out with worry and overwork. He died on October 6th, 1891, at the early age of 46 years. My grandfather represented the people of Limerick at his funeral to Glasnevin Cemetery in Dublin.

His adherence to Parnell cost my grandfather a second term as mayor; some of his closest friends who had taken the anti-Parnelite side voting against him. Later, a deputation of these men, headed by Stephen O'Mara, called to 27 William Street to explain that there had been nothing personal in their attitude. A "bottle" was then produced and there were handshakes all round. When we think

of the intense bitterness engendered by the Parnell split, this was a remarkable happening and a great tribute to all concerned. A massive golden medallion, having on one side the head of Charles Stuart Parnell, "The Leader of the Irish People", and on the other the Treaty Stone, which is still on the great mayoral chain, and the borough boundary marker on the canal bank, near the bridge leading to Park and Corbally, with my grandfather's name and the date (1891), remain as memorials of his mayoralty.

Some time before these events, my grandmother had died and now my grandfather was again bereaved by the deaths in quick succession of his two sons, Michael, house surgeon in Barrington's Hospital, and Matthew, a young solicitor. He bore these losses with exemplary fortitude.

At that time, there were certain appointments which the Corporation had power to confer on prominent citizens. The post of manager of the Gas Works had been held by William Spillane, a former mayor and founder of the well known firm of tobacco manufacturers. When Spillane died, in about 1897, he was succeeded by my grandfather, who continued in that position until his death. He had long ceased to take an active part in the family's oil and colour business, the management of which devolved on his sons Timothy and Peter.

The evening of my grandfather's days were spent peacefully with his

family, especially the annual holidays in Kilkee, every August. By this time, the West Clare Railway had come into existence and it was no longer necessary to travel down the river in order to take a seaside holiday. He had ceased to be a member of Limerick Corporation about the time of his appointment as manager of the Gas Works.

At the turn of the century, he was gratified by the healing of the Parnell split and the reunion of the Irish Nationalist Party, under the leadership of John Redmond.

My grandfather had long been an active member of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and was also honorary treasurer of the Catholic Literary Institute up to the date of his death. Towards the end of 1905, on the occasion of the appointment of the Institute's Spiritual Director Monsignor O'Riordan to the position of rector to the Irish College of Rome, my grandfather was chairman of a committee of citizens who presented a chalice and paten to the departing priest. This occasion may be regarded as my grandfather's swansong.

When the end came, he was attended by a Jesuit, Father Michael Browne, then rector of the Sacred Heart Church and at one time a neighbour in William Street. Many years later, in a letter to a relative, Father Browne referred to him as "A very good and holy man". Let that be his epitaph.

My grandfather Patrick Riordan died on 3rd October 1907.