

THE SHANNON SCHEME

A Forgotten Limerick Connection

by Willie W. Gleeson



ne fine day in the year 1925, three members of Athlunkard Boat Club were engaged in putting the final touches to the Desmond Hall ballroom in Cruise's Hotel, in preparation for the club's annual monster whist drive - a popular pastime in those early days. They were Jimmy O'Donoghue, Charlie Treacy and the

author.

As they were about to leave the premises, they observed two men seated at a table, viewing a large chart spread out before them. One of them was Patrick McGilligan, Minister for Industry and Commerce, in the Cosgrave Government; the other, Dr. Thomas McLoughlin, who is credited with having pioneered the Shannon Hydro Electric Scheme while in Germany, where he acted as engineer, in a consultant capacity, to the German government.

During the course of conversation by the pair - clearly audible to those in the near vicinity - McGilligan was heard to say: "I asked Cosgrave (head of the Executive Council of the Irish Free State) to advance us the sum of £5 million, required for our scheme, to which he replied rather abruptly. 'We've no money, Paddy; we're almost broke. You know damn well, the damage caused by the Civil War is, at a rough guess, put at £52 million, and that no figure as yet can be put on compensation'".

McGilligan asked him what was the result of his recent interview with General Von Hindenburg, President of the Third German Reich, regarding his mission. "Nothing doing, Doctor", said Hindenburg. "You know, as well as I do, that we suffered defeat in the 1914-18 war, which has left us penniless, not to mention war reparations, which we must pay - or else. And, as if to add to our misfortune, remember that we, too, had a civil war which ended when yours commenced. Sorry, I can't help you".

At this juncture, all contacts having failed to "raise the wind", a Miss Cooke, who was sipping tea with her friend, Miss Flynn (daughter of the proprietress of Cruise's), approached the table where the promoters sat and, apologising for the intrusion, addressed them thus: "Gentlemen, I couldn't help overhearing the conversation in which you indulged. To be brief. How much money do you require for your proposed electric scheme? Please don't think me curious; on the contrary. I shall be able to help out, as my brother, Michael Cooke, is the general manager of the National Bank of Ireland. At this very moment, she continued, he is here on a short visit. So, make up your minds NOW, she smiled, as he will be returning

to Dublin tomorrow.

Dumbfounded, flabbergasted, are but mild words to describe the feelings of the duo, who seemed as if glued to their chairs on hearing such news. Miss Cooke interposed: "What time shall I arrange for the meeting, gentlemen?" "Any time at all, Miss Cooke, will suit us", replied the Doctor. "That's fine; say 3 o'clock tomorrow afternoon", concluded the good lady.

True to her word, Miss Cooke and brother Michael turned up at the appointed time and place. After an exchange of greetings, Michael Cooke's two newest borrowers, after thanking their fairy godmother, gave him all the information he required about the Shannon Hydro Electric Scheme. Mr. Cooke was very impressed by the two "industrious young men", and said that he and the National Bank would go as guarantors for the £5 million.

A promissory note was signed and the money was made available shortly afterwards. There was a lasting friendship from the time forward between the three men. Dr. McLoughlin said of Michael Cooke that he was "a brilliant banker!"

In the weeks that followed, I, with a daily flow of thousands of my excited fellow-citizens, was privileged to see a model of the Shannon Hydro Electric Scheme (which had been devised by Dr. McLoughlin), on view in the Council Chamber of Limerick's City Hall. It showed all the features of the Shannon Scheme, which are familiar to us today, namely, the intake at O'Brien's Bridge, the 7 mile long canal, its contours, etc; the Power Station, and the Tail Race, where the water - which, having operated the giant turbines that generated the electricity - flows into the Shannon down stream.

I knew Michael Cooke personally for what he was: a gentleman and good neighbour, and one who refused a Knighthood, "for services rendered to the banking system when based in London".

His father, and uncles Richard Cooke and Charles Harty, were long established pig commissioners, who travelled extensively in the south and west of Ireland, buying pigs for Limerick's famous bacon factories - Denny's, Matterson's, O'Mara's, Shaw's - all of which gave steady employment to hundreds in the not-too-distant past.

Perhaps it might be a good idea to put up a memorial tablet to Miss Cooke and Michael Cooke in Cruise's Hotel? But for their generosity the harnessing of the water power to generate electricity for the benefit of the Irish people might have been delayed for another decade.