

LIMERICK'S NEW LOOK

Limerick, which this year celebrates the 300th anniversary of its Treaty, has an unenviable reputation in the rest of Ireland. Is it really as bad as they say? Today and for the next three days, *Irish Times* writers assess the city and its people.

Ditching the image of Stab City

John Waters finds a new spirit of glasnost in Limerick, a widespread acceptance that if the public perception of the city is to be addressed, it must first of all be acknowledged. Jack McManus took the photographs



Jim Kemmy . . . Anxious that the Treaty 300 is not used as an excuse once again to paper over the cracks of the past.

"City of beautiful churches and spires,
City of pubs and lowly desires,
City of gossips that tell what they're told,
City of youth that just waits to grow old."

SO WENT the first stanza of an unsigned poem, written on the back of a menu found by a waiter in Limerick's former Intercontinental Hotel (now Jury's) in 1970. It is quoted in the official souvenir yearbook of Limerick Treaty 300 - 1991.

Such has been Limerick's irrefutably poor image in the eyes of outsiders that those who in recent years have begun to address the problem have incorporated into their propaganda this and other elements of the city's previously low public esteem, creating a veritable culture of self-deprecation. There is a new spirit of glasnost in Limerick, a widespread acceptance that if the public perception of the city as a not entirely godforsaken kip is to be addressed, it must first of all be acknowledged.

This makes the visiting journalist's task just a little less hazardous.



— the Limerick Confraternity had an all-time high membership of 7,000.

Limerick also has a nasty, and not unrelated, history of anti-Semitism. Many of the Limerick Jewish community moved to Cork in 1884 following a series of hostile incidents. In 1904, the director of the Holy Family Confraternity, Fr Creagh, told his congregation that the Jews were "a curse to Limerick". He accused the Jews of improper business methods, of "shedding Christian blood" and of plotting to kidnap Christian children.

"If I have the means of driving them out I shall have accomplished one good thing in my life," he told his assembled flock. There followed the Limerick pogrom, an economic boycott of the Limerick Jewish community, which lasted for two years. At the end of the last century there were 130 Jews living in Limerick; 100 years later there are just two.

All of this has helped to make Limerick something of a puzzle among Irish cities. A militant labour tradition, combined with a religious fervour unparalleled elsewhere has created a social cocktail which serves to scare off outsiders of almost every hue. This has created all sorts of odd historical contradictions, such as the support by leaders of the Limerick labour movement for Franco during the Spanish Civil War.

In recent years, Limerick has been dogged by social problems and an unsightly city centre. Throughout the '60s and '70s in particular, the principal streets became run down, with an array of gaping holes and derelict buildings. Around this period, too, the city spawned two instant ghettos, Moyross and South Hill, each comprising 1,200 local

But, says O'Shannon, Limerick has changed for the better. "People may take the piss out of Treaty 300. But it has instilled a helluva lot of pride in Limerick people."

Another who shares this view is local Labour politician, Jim Kemmy — in the words of Cathal O'Shannon, "the acceptable face of Limerick". Kemmy has long led the struggle against the forces of darkness in his native city. The fact that his political position is now high unassailable is generally regarded as the most eloquent proof that much of this darkness has been left in the past.

Kemmy himself, however, is more circumspect, pointing to the continuing failure of the city to come to terms with its growing population of travellers as evidence that all is by no means as rosy as one might be led to believe. While the Treaty 300 celebrations gather momentum, residents in the Castleroy area off the Dublin road are embroiled in an escalating controversy over a proposal for a £350,000 halting site. "These are issues behind the scenes," says Kemmy. "And we're making a very bad job of handling them."

Jim Kemmy is publisher and

editor of a twice-yearly historical magazine, *The Old Limerick Journal*, which is credited with contributing much to the city's recent awakening to its own culture and history.

Kemmy is at once Limerick's fiercest critic and its staunchest defender, but is anxious that the Treaty 300 not be an excuse once again to paper over the cracks of the past. Any evaluation of the past or present, he says, must embrace the bad as well as the good — and not just in Limerick. Kemmy sees his native city as containing in microcosm the forces of provincialism, xenophobia and narrow-

mindedness which did so much to shape the country as a whole.

"In many ways life in Limerick didn't change much when the British left, because a lot of the sons of the wealthy older generation simply continued on into the professions, and the status quo perpetuated itself. The city became very introverted, and lacked self-confidence. People didn't care very much for the world outside.

"The working class came under the influence of the Redemptionists, which gave a kind of all-embracing fellow-feeling, but in other ways was narrow and limiting.

"This often happens when people get independence. Freedom and liberty are never analysed. There's also often an element of triumphalism, which masquerades as culture, in which people with views other than your own are not tolerated or integrated.

"In this and other respects, Limerick is a microcosm of Ireland. This culture blotted out all dissent. The Church was all-powerful, the press afraid, and the political parties were ineffectual and cut off. We did some terrible things in the name of religion and politics — things that, looking back, make you

scream with anger and bitterness.

"We should always be angry in this country about poverty and injustice, and they were the products of those forces. But a lot of the things which are regarded as unique to Limerick also surfaced in other parts of Ireland, although perhaps not in the extreme way they did here in Limerick."

Limerick as metaphor for Ireland, says Kemmy, continues to hold true. "We're still in a mess. Limerick is still a microcosm of the country as a whole. Having gone down the free-trade road, we haven't been able to generate enough enterprise to

create employment for our young people."

But, says Kemmy, Limerick is changing; its continued poor image is now less than fair. "Every town has good and bad. We're all products of our heritage and background. People continue to think of Limerick as an outpost of backwardness and provincialism, and that is unfair, I think. I have no difficulty living in Limerick at all. That's not chauvinism; you must make the best of your life wherever you go. A lot of the city's poor image in recent years came about because of the usage of catchphrase shorthand journalism to deal with some of the social problems that were happening here."

Limerick is also known nationally for the outspokenly conservative public statements of its archbishop, Dr Jeremiah Newman. Jim Kemmy, who has engaged in public controversies with Dr Newman on numerous occasions, says that he continues to have a good personal relationship with the archbishop.

"He has a good mind, he's well-read and is well intentioned. But he likes controversy as well. I wish he'd let the world go by. You can't keep the floods out

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As good as anywhere

IT HAS to be said that the people most likely to wel-

come a Limerickman leaves Limerick, he's gone. Out of sight out

They point to the city's thriving arts scene, the Belltable, the



Civic Trust founder Denis Leonard... a philosophy built on self help.

In the Treaty 300 yearbook also, for example, the chairman of the 1991 celebrations committee, Cathal O'Shannon, describes how he, a Dubliner, first encountered the city in the 1940s and '50s. It was, he says, "a tight-assed sort of place, where the natives could be distinctly unfriendly to outsiders."

Limerick was historically a city of merchant princes and their economic subjects. Both a port and market town, its principal industries were related to farming — bacon curing, flour, cheese, clothing, condensed milk. The relationship between the working and employer classes was always an uneasy and uneven one, leading to a long history of industrial confrontation.

Being a port, Limerick inevitably fulfilled its quota of drinking, fighting and prostitution, and represented a ripe picking ground for the various religious orders which set up there following Catholic Emancipation in the late 1800s. Foremost among these were the Jesuits and the Redemptorists, who appointed themselves to cater respectively for the spiritual welfare of the middle and working classes of the city.

The Jesuits turned out the sons of the merchant princes for places in the ruling and professional classes, while the Redemptorists, using the crude, but effective instrument of the confraternity, kept the workers in check. The Holy Family Confraternity, above all else, gave Limerick its reputation as "nothing but a city of churches and piety upon piety."

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But in Limerick it was much, much more than this. There were prefects, badges of office and sanctions for non-attendance or lack of due reverence. Attendance was compulsory, and excuses were cross-checked by the prefects or the director. In 1918, immediately prior to the setting up of the Limerick Soviet — the first soviet outside of the USSR

authority houses, on either side of town, both of which became notorious sources of crimes, violence and social alienation.

Both estates have unemployment-levels in excess of 80 per cent, and are undoubtedly high among the blackspots of Europe in this regard. After a series of notorious incidents in the city in the late '70s and early '80s, Limerick earned itself the name of Stab City. This perception fed back into the city's consciousness, leading to further apathy and decay.

Civic indifference became so acute that at one point in the '70s it was proposed to run a ring road through the city's most historic location, King John's Castle, which dates from 1200 AD. Within the past decade, however, serious strides have been made to restore the city centre, first through the efforts of Shannon Development, and latterly through the work of the Limerick Civic Trust, the first body of its kind to be set up in this country.

The Civic Trust to date has helped to complete in the region of 50 renewal projects in the city, at a total cost of £1 million. Over the past few years, the trust has targeted derelict buildings and sites, many the property of absentee landlords, for renewal and restoration. It has worked in concert with Limerick Corporation, has engaged in its own fundraising activities and has created avenues through the bureaucratic jungle which usually causes such initiatives to be stymied.

The result, says Civic Trust founder, local man Denis Leonard, is an upsurge in community spirit and awareness.

The Civic Trust idea was borrowed and adapted by Mr Leonard from a model which had been successfully applied in several British cities. He became involved about 10 years ago, when a proposal was mooted to decentralise some 1,400 civil servants from Dublin to the Limerick region. Such was the level of reluctance among the civil servants that it began to occur to Limerick that something needed to be done about its image problem.

Limerick Image Committee was formed, from which later developed the Limerick Civic Trust.

The Civic Trust philosophy, says Denis Leonard is based on self-help. Their biggest obstacle was the lack of a coherent local leadership to co-ordinate the various initiatives. Others, while paying fulsome tribute to the efforts of Denis Leonard, say that his fellow-citizens could do much more to help than is yet the case.

"Most of the money has not been Limerick money," says Cathal O'Shannon. "And much of the effort has come from the blow-ins. In the past five years, thanks mainly to Denis Leonard, there's been a realisation that this can be a good-looking city. But that was long overdue. Limerick society, as was in the '50s, '60s and '70s, was a self-serving, inward-looking, unadventurous, self-satisfied set-up. It took a lot to shake them out of lethargy. Much of the problem was sheer greed: the people who owned the sites and buildings around the city centre. They let it become like a bomb-damaged lot, sure in the knowledge that, come better times, they would be able to make a lot of money out of it."



Cathal O'Shannon... "It's the blow-ins, mostly, who are trying hardest to turn the city's poor image inside out."

come you to Limerick are more likely than not to be outsiders who have chosen, for whatever reason, to settle there.

"Limerick people don't talk to you," says one longtime observer who prefers to remain anonymous. "They confront you with words. You think these people are antagonistic, but they're not. It's just their way. Part of what they have to learn is how to handle their dealings with outsiders."

"If Limerick people have a problem," says Limerick-born Gerry Stenbridge of RTE's Scrap Saturday satire show, "it's that they don't really know how to take people in. They're fairly genial to one another, but they have a problem relating to outsiders. To some extent this accounts for their bad reputation. And, another thing about them is that if you leave they don't tend to have a great deal of time for you either. If a Corkman leaves Cork, he's still a Corkman; but

of mind, they don't care much either way." As Cathal O'Shannon points out, it's the blow-ins, mostly, who are trying hardest to turn the city's poor image inside out. The late Hilda O'Malley, widow of the former education minister, Donogh, used to say that Limerick had all the disadvantages of the small town, and none of the advantages of the city, but many of the younger inhabitants of modern Limerick, some of whom moved there from the capital, now insist that it's the other way about.

"At the moment," says one, "it's just a little on the small side to be anonymous in, but that isn't by any means always a disadvantage." Most people agree that building the university several miles out, on the outskirts of the city, was a major mistake, but nevertheless, the city at night is an alive place. The city centre pubs are thronged, even mid-week, with the workers from the city's offices and factories.

improved city centre as evidence that all life is not necessarily elsewhere. The biggest challenge, many agree, is to convince the locals that Limerick, for all its problems, really is as good as anywhere else.

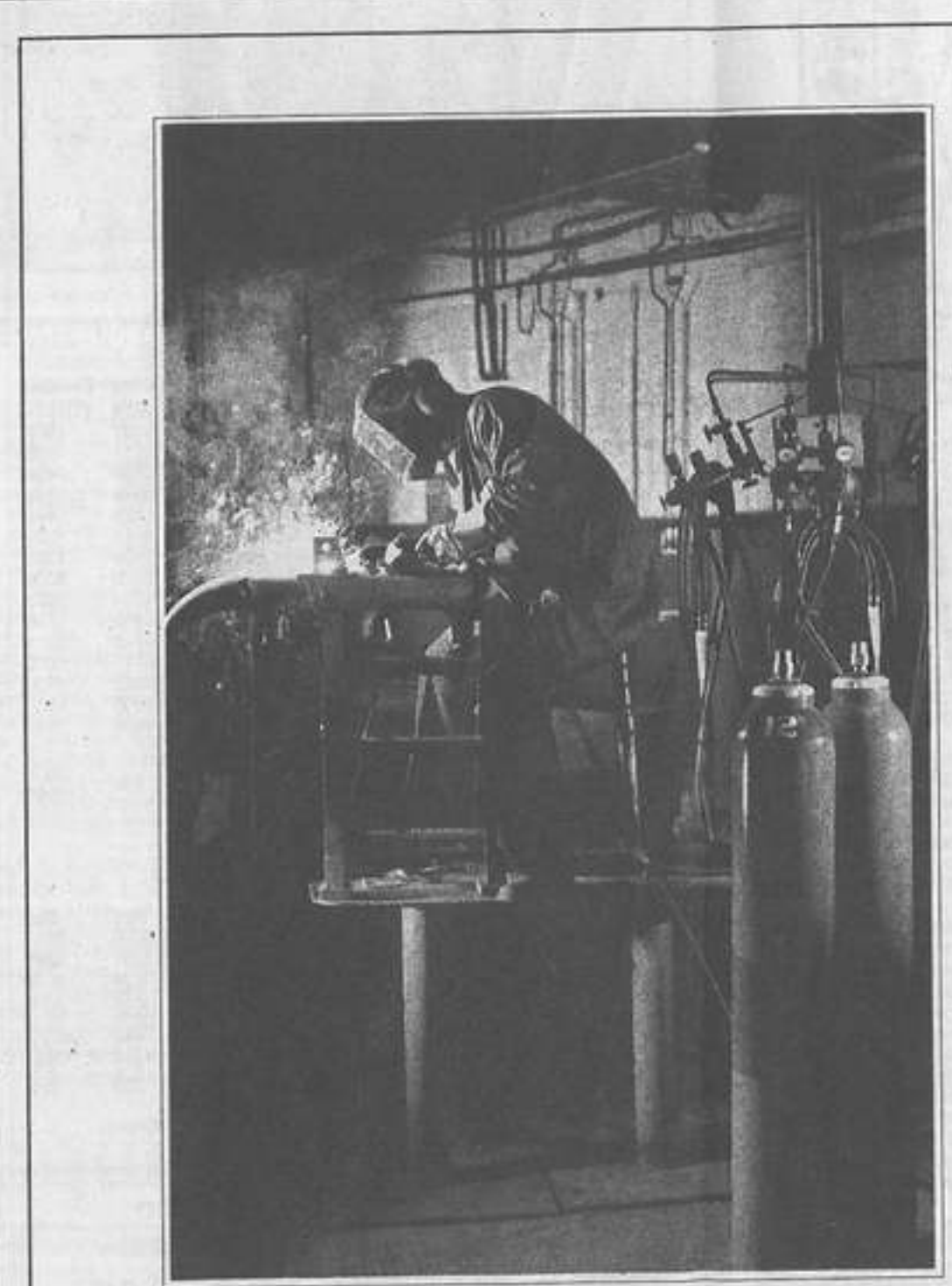
Some, however, while acknowledging the improvements, point to the vast amount of progress to be made in unravelling Limerick's vast tapestry of social despair. If the city's facelift isn't just to be an exercise in window dressing, they say, something urgently needs to be done about problems like the travellers, and the vast welfare ghettos on the fringes of the city.

In general, though, the prognosis is positive. Limerick people talk among themselves about someone — a native son of some renown — by the name of "Dickie Harris." This chap, they aver, has "cleaned up his act and made a comeback" in his own line of work. And his native city is trying hard to follow his example.

tude now: people have to survive. Our old-fashioned role of being paternal is no use anymore. That concept is outdated: we can't rule people's minds anymore. We need to learn tolerance. The day of Big Brother is over. There's a family planning clinic in Limerick since 1975, and nobody takes a blind bit of notice of it. That power, which bishops once had, has slipped away.

"There's a drift opened up, a nonalignment, between the people and the power structures. There is a great need for alternatives in society, so as to give people the opportunity to express their true selves. We need to involve people more and more in our society. We must all, in Limerick and elsewhere, look at what we have done in the past, and at the problems we have as a result. These are there to haunt us, and all of us must be indicted for it. It's not just a problem for Limerick. It's not just a problem for the government. It's all our problem."

TOMORROW Women of Limerick



Charles Roe, Welder.

"I'm involved in training welders, from basics, in all manner of welding.

"That means that, under one roof, I have to have the necessary equipment for everything from MIG welding to plastic welding. And that's a lot of equipment: torches, wirefeeds, fluxes, fillers and so on. Not to mention gases, from Oxygen to CO₂ and Helishield, to Argon and Acetylene.

"I'm training individuals who may never have held a torch in their lives, and teaching them a complicated and precise process.

TAKE IT FROM US. WE UNITE THE TOUGHER ELEMENTS.

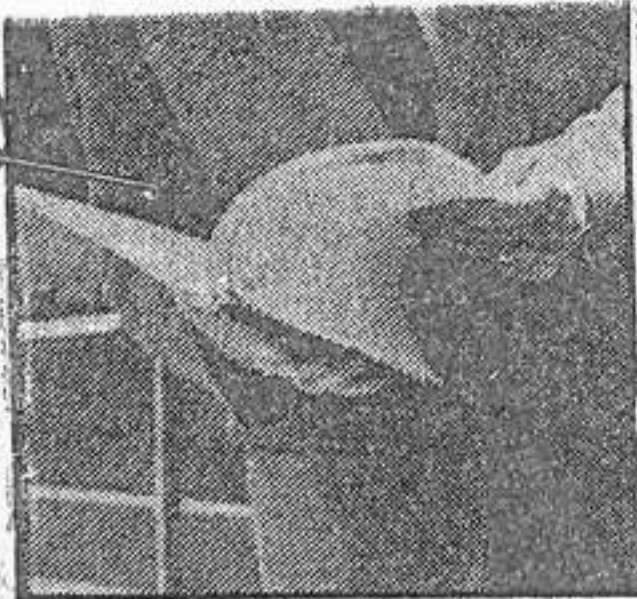
"We therefore need perfection. Clean, well maintained equipment, and pure gases.

"Irish Industrial Gases supply all the needs. They have done for years. They also provide service and educational facilities. For example, if we have a problem, or if there's a new gas available, IIG are only too happy to come in and bring us up to date."



the human element

Irish Industrial Gases PO Box 201 Bluebell, Dublin 12. Tel: 01-501444, Cork 021-353611. Limerick 061-29744, Kilkenny 056-22906 & Athlone 0902-75106. And Gas Agents Nationwide



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