The great gunpowder explosion of 1837

LIMERICK CHRONICLE. SATURDAY, DECEMBER 2, 1944

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ON THE 3rd January, 1837, a catastrophe of a most lamentable kind occurred in Limerick by an explosion of gunpowder in the premises of Mr. Michael Ryan, a gun maker and vendor of gunpowder, No. 3 George Street. Eleven persons were killed by this explosion, viz., Margaret McMahon, John McMahon, Bridget O'Donoghue, John O'Brien, Patrick Doolan, Mary Barry, John Enright, Bridget Doolan, John McMahon and Michael O'Neill, a watchman. Owing to the severity of the blast, mention was made of being killed only ten people were named in the articles.

The cause of the catastrophe could never be clearly ascertained, as the only person in the part of the house where the explosion was, was blown up and his body torn to pieces.

The terrific details of this dreadful affair caused a shudder of horror whenever they are brought to memory, while the miraculous escape which some respectable families had from being involved in the worst consequences of the explosion is referred to the special agency of Providence.

Every effort was made by the Mayor and magistrates to mitigate the sufferings of the survivors. A deputation was formed before the Lord Lieutenant, who gave his active sympathy, and a public subscription was raised to which everyone contributed.

There were four persons under the roof at the time, three of whom were killed, while a young man named Deskey, an apprentice, escaped with his life, though he had been blown to a great height and came down senseless in the street at a considerable distance. At the house No. 2 George Street, the widows of Michael Ryan, one of the most extensive and esteemed merchants in the city, resided with her family, two sons, a daughter and sister-in-law. They were all in bed, being instantly stunned, after lying unconscious under the ruins for an hour. The first recital or perception that Mrs. Ryan remembered was hearing her daughter Barbara, a child of eight years old, who slept with her, crying, "Mamma, where are you?" They were at the time buried in the debris. A long and fruitless search had been made for them. It was suggested they had gone to the country. Further exertions were about being relinquished when the almost inaudible cries of the child were heard under the ruins. Efforts were again made and the child was heard to cry to "take care of Mamma," whose collarbone had been broken, her persons having been overwhelmed in rubbish between the shop and the underground apartment, yet supported by two doors having come together in their fall so as to form an arch over them. The legs and feet, however, were so crushed that they could not change their position. One of the sons, William, was blown up in the air on the mattress on which he was sleeping and came down in the street with it blazing around him, he asleepe all the while. He sustained no injury.

The elder brother was not hit, but the corner of the floor whereupon his bed stood could be seen for days after from the street like a shelf without support, attached to the tottering wall. Mrs. Catherine Ryan, sister-in-law of Mrs. Ryan, had no perception of anything having happened until the need of the mercurial in the city, when she found herself in a public-house in Arthur's Quay, having been blown out, so stunned as to be senseless, buried under a heap of rubbish, and lying for an hour in the street with a beam of timber over her. A servant, who slept in the room next to Mrs. Catherine Ryan, the sister-in-law of Mrs. Ryan, was blown into the hall of the house No. 3, belonging to Mr. Wm. Wilson, Mr. Ellard, who resided near the corner of Denmark Street, opposite Richardson's was lifted off the ground and with a whirling motion dashed across the street and buried under a heap of rubbish, from which he was dug out. His respectable family had a very narrow escape as did so the family of Mr. Thomas Tracy, who lived at No. 13, of Mr. J. Hallowell, No. 10, and Mr. J. Burke, No. 18, etc., etc.