

# Studiisque Asperrima Belli

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by Tony MacMahon

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Limerick at the opening of the present century was a garrison town. The city had four army barracks strategically situated, the oldest being King John's Castle. The others were the Militia (Strand) Barracks, the Ordnance Barracks (now Heiton's premises) Mulgrave Street, and the New Barracks (now Sarsfield Barracks).

Various regiments, Irish, English, Welch, and Scottish, were garrisoned in Limerick but it seemed an unwritten rule that Welch and Scottish regiments were never stationed in the same barracks — could it be because of the myth of animosity between various branches of the Celts? Irish regiments, such as the Munster Fusiliers and the Connaught Rangers, were also garrisoned in Limerick and many of the soldiers in these regiments were from the city. The officers of the regiments did not live in the barracks but had their residences in the exclusive Georgian houses in Clare Street and in the Crescent.

The city had R.I.C. barracks situated in Edward Street, John Street, William Street, Mary Street, Thomondgate, Frederick (now O'Curry) Street, Caherdavin and Dooradoyle.

British presence and military control was felt all round from the County Club in O'Connell Street to the many licensed premises throughout the city. Rank distinction was strict and the ruling class never in doubt. But many of the citizens of Limerick were nationalist in outlook whether they came from 'Parnellite' or 'Healyite' families. For all, the British presence and the military parades to Church on Sunday provided colour without lasting impression.

On the 14th December, 1913 a group of men held a meeting in the Council Chamber of the Town Hall. Their object was to consider the advisability of forming a Volunteer Corps in the city. There were two organisations primarily involved — the Irish Republican Brotherhood and the Ancient Order of Hibernians. The I.R.B. had to work *sub rosa* but they exercised influence in many and unexpected quarters. Their open organisation — the Wolfe Tone Club — undertook the task of bringing the Volunteer Corps into existence. On 25th January, 1914, a meeting was held in the Athenaeum Hall, Cecil Street, at which Pdraig Pearse and Roger Casement appealed to the large audience to support and enlist in the Irish Volunteer Movement. Practically every man present joined up.

Offices were opened at No. 1 Hartstonge Street where enrolments took place nightly. Drilling was taught in the Butter Market Hall and the Corn Market. The drill masters were Volunteers who had had service in the British Army. A Fianna Eireann branch was formed for the training in scout work for schoolboys and youths. The Fianna Hall was at the end of Schoolhouse Lane, and behind St. Ita's School in St. Joseph Street.

In September, 1914 the Home Rule Bill passed through both Houses of Parliament but with the proviso that it would not come into operation for a minimum of twelve months, or until the War was ended. John Redmond's policy advocating enlistment by the Volunteers in the British Army split the Volunteer movement, and in

Limerick the majority of the corps sided with Redmond. The faithful minority would have been without military instructors were it not for Captain Robert Monteith who had been deported from Dublin and had taken up residence in Limerick. Here he acted as instructor and organiser for the Volunteer movement in the city and county. Having had long service, including war experience, in the British Army he was an invaluable asset to the Limerick Volunteers.

On Whit Sunday, May 23, 1915, an armed parade of Volunteers took place in the city. Volunteers from Dublin, Cork and Tipperary were also represented in the parade. The march began at Pery Square and followed the route through O'Connell Street, O'Connell Avenue, Wolfe Tone Street, Boherbuoy, the Irishtown and Englishtown, passing by the Treaty Stone and back to the starting point through Sarsfield Street and O'Connell Street.

The parade passed off without incident until it reached Wolfe Tone Street where British soldiers jeered the marching Volunteers from the many windows of the New Barracks. The march along the Boherbuoy district was made through a barrage of abuse from hundreds of women whose sons and husbands were fighting in the Great War and in respect of whom the women received "separation money". The jeers and the bitter hostility was intensified, and missiles of all sorts were thrown at the marchers as they passed through Mungret Street and the Irishtown. The crowds massed on both sides of the street scarcely allowing passage for the marching men but the green clad ranks marched on resolutely, as though bouquets were being showered on them, and their lines remained unbroken. The parade eventually returned to Pery Square via O'Connell Street as planned.

It was rumoured in the following week that some sums of money had passed hands from a mysterious source to provide a few score of rowdies with drink in the hope that the Volunteers would use their firearms and thus bring about their own suppression by the British authorities. The discipline of the marching Volunteers foiled that scheme. Among the men who marched that day were Pdraig Pearse, Tom Clarke, Willie Pearse, Liam Mellows, Sean McDermott, Ned Daly, Terence McSwiney, George Clancy, Eamon de Valera and a Tomas McCurtin.

As the Great War dragged on and soldiers returned home to Limerick maimed physically and mentally — shell-shocked or gassed — the "separation money" lost some of its value when contrasted with the enormous cost in terms of death and suffering of loved ones.

Limerickmen had seen service in the British Army since the end of the siege of 1691. Irish regiments were well known for their fighting skills in campaigns in many parts of the Empire "upon which the sun never set". One such soldier was 'Darky' Boland of Walsh's Lane off Edward Street. He served in the Boer War and later in the Great War. When serving with Lord Kitchner's troops in

Africa he had a letter written to his wife telling her that he was fine and was about to make a shift for Ladysmith soon. Mrs. Boland went around the lane and street, complaining bitterly that 'Darky' was making a shift for a doxy named Lady Smith and never thought of making one for her!

The nationalist movement developed steadily in Limerick after the Easter Rising of 1916. The Volunteers, the Fianna, the Gaelic League and the G.A.A. all contributed in awakening a pride in Irish culture and a nationalist outlook in politics. Feiseanna were held in the Markets' Field in Garryowen, and on the city outskirts in Caherdavin. Hurling matches and athletic events were occasions for bands and parades. St. Patrick's Day celebrations boosted national pride as well as religious fervour.

The Volunteers were then integrated into the Irish Republican Army and the military arm became active with Flying Columns operating throughout the county and with men 'on the run' with 'safe' houses in and near the city. No. 19, the Crescent, where the Benson family lived, was such a 'safe' house where men on the run could shelter. Open violence came to the city in April, 1919, An I.R.A. man, Bobby Byrne, was a prisoner and patient in the City Home and Hospital, guarded round the clock by members of the R.I.C. The I.R.A. command had planned Byrne's rescue, and slipping in with visitors into the hospital the Volunteers attacked the R.I.C. guards. After a short but bitter encounter one member of the R.I.C. was killed and another seriously wounded as Byrne was taken from the building. It was later discovered that he had been wounded, and he died in the Ryan household, Knocklisheen, on Passion Sunday April 6, 1919.

In the same month the British military authorities proclaimed Limerick city a special military area. All roads and bridges into the city were blocked and guarded by soldiers. Movement in or out required a permit from the military authorities. The decision to make the order was directly influenced by the attempted rescue of Bobby Byrne and the authorities feared further attacks. The or-

der caused difficulties, especially for workers coming and going from the city, and they retaliated.

On 14th April the following proclamation was posted throughout the city:

#### **Limerick United Trades and Labour Council Proclamation**

The Workers of Limerick, assembled in Council, hereby Declare Cessation of All Work from 5 a.m. on Monday Fourteenth of April, 1919 as a Protest against the Decision of the British Government in Compelling them to Procure Permits in Order to Earn Their Daily Bread.

By Order of the Strike Committee  
Mechanics' Institute.

The workers of Limerick had entered the nationalist movement. On April 26 the strike committee ordered all back to work and shortly afterwards the order was lifted.

In March, 1920 the Black and Tans arrived in the city, ostensibly to augment the policing duties of the R.I.C. But the members of the new corps were mostly ex-soldiers, many with prison records — thugs given authority. These were soon followed by the Auxiliaries who were believed to be formed from ex-officer grades of the British Army on the loose in England after the War, and an embarrassment to the Government there.

Harassment of the people increased after the arrival of the new corps, with assassinations and thuggery by the 'Tans' and 'Auxies'. In addition to these atrocities to people, property was also wantonly destroyed. The house of the Hartney family in Davis Street was blasted by a bomb thrown through the front window from a Crossley Tender from which Tans and Auxiliaries cheered and jeered at the havoc they had caused. Luckily the family escaped injury but the street was strewn with glass from windows of many houses in the neighbourhood. The four faces of Tait's clock were smashed by the explosion and coloured glass was scattered on the road around for children to gather up as souvenirs while their elders dealt with the



The Fianna Eireann Culture Club 1913, outside the clubhouse at Schoolhouse Lane.

damage to their houses and windows.

A house in High Street opposite Begley's grocery shop was burned to the ground and people going to Mass on Sunday witnessed the havoc — smouldering ruins and a lone cooking pot on the grate of a gable wall on the third floor.

Outrages like these did not cower or frighten people. In June 1920 a celebration at Sarsfield's Rock, Ballineety, was organised. Horse-drawn long cars brought the people from the city to visit the famous place where Sarsfield and his men blew up the Williamite siege train which had

been destined to raise the famous siege of Limerick in 1691. The people alighted from cars on the Tipperary road to form into marching order, to complete the journey to the rock on the hill. But the road was blocked by members of the R.I.C. and the Black and Tans. In front of the marchers the Irish tricolor was raised by Mick Quin of St. Joseph Street. The R.I.C. demanded the flag but were refused. A scuffle ensued during which the flagstaff was broken in pieces but Quin held on to the flag. As the people reformed beyond the R.I.C. blockade the tricolor was again unfurled and raised aloft with a stout branch of a



A breach in the wall of the Strand Barracks, July 1922.



A group of Limerick people at Sarsfield's Rock Ballyneety, June 1920. Tony MacMahon is the young boy at the back (left) with his hand on his hip.

tree as flagstaff. There was no further incident and the celebration at the rock went off as planned.

However the Crown forces did not intend to forget Mick Quin and his tussle for the flag. Mick was from a family of stonecutters. His brothers Paddy and Tom cut and sculptured stone in the yard at the back of 11, St. Joseph Street. Mick's part in the business was to bring stone to the yard and sculpture to the cemetery in an ass and car. A few weeks after Ballineety the Black and Tans came for Mick. As he was put in the Crossley Tender his mother was crying and begging for his release. Mick's only concern was shown when he called to her, "Don't mind me, Mother, but mind the ass for me".

Curfew was enforced nightly and pity the man or woman found on the streets during that time. In some parts of the city such as Boherbuoy and Carey's Road, curfew was often in force from four o'clock in the afternoon.

One Sunday morning in July 1920 two R.I.C. men were shot dead at the Park railings opposite Carey's Road. The Black and Tans were on the scene without delay and anyone foolish enough to be within reach was stopped, questioned and assaulted. One innocent man from the Schoolhouse Lane area taking his usual Sunday morning walk in the People's Park was shot dead by the Tans without question or challenge. Curfew was immediately enforced in Boherbuoy, Carey's Road and Edward Street but the two I.R.A., men who had shot the R.I.C. man had made their escape by climbing on to the Red Bridge in Carey's Road and hiding in the railway 'Loco' till after dark.

Among the R.I.C. in Edward Street there was a Sergeant Horan who was the dread of the people in the area. He roared, shouted and pushed people around, using his baton on many an arm, back and buttocks. But the harassed people could see humour in the midst of all the 'troubles'. The story is told of a countryman driving an ass and car up the road in Edward Street. The load was heavy and the ass was tired, so there was a standstill. No matter how much the asphalt was laid on his back the ass

would not move. A man standing at the corner had pity on the animal and asked the driver to stop the walloping. He went over to the ass and lifting his drooping ear quietly spat a good-sized chew of tobacco into the drum. The result was spectacular and immediate- the ass started forward at a spurt and passed Edward Street Barracks at a brisk trot. A passerby, noticing the apparent miracle asked the tobacco chewer what he did to make the animal go. "I just told him to move fast because Horan was coming", was the reply.

The same Sergeant Horan was subsequently instrumental in saving Fr. Hennessy O.S.A. from being assassinated by Crown forces. After the War of Independence ended it was revealed that Sergeant Horan had been helping the I.R.A. with information during the "troubles".

There were cruel and sadistic attacks on public servants also. A Dock policeman employed by Limerick Harbour Commissioners was coming on night duty from his home in the Dublin Road area when he was stopped by the Black and Tans on the road outside Dunbar's shop on the hill of Park. They questioned him about his uniform and his destination and then they ordered him to strip off to the skin and made him jog-trot in the Dublin Road in the bright evening light while they kept their rifles trained on his back. Any hesitation would be certain death. The unfortunate man got no aid or shelter until he reached the opening to Pouleen where a courageous man reached out and pulled him into a friendly hallway.

By order of the Military Governor every household was required to post a list of its occupants, giving name, age, sex and relationship, at the back of the front door. Houses were frequently raided, even at night, lists would be checked and occupants paraded and questioned. Delay in opening a door for the 'Tans' could result in the butt of a rifle breaking in the panels.

The I.R.A. flying columns were intensifying the attack on British forces. R.I.C., barracks were attacked and several burned to the ground. Other government property was also destroyed. As a result, the British authorities

sought and obtained Criminal Injury decrees in the courts against local government bodies but the councils were slow to pay. To overcome this, the British Government rushed legislation through Parliament in 1920. The object of the law was to secure the retention of grants payable to these local councils by the British Local Government Board. The statutes also gave power to the British authorities for the garnishee of local rates due to local bodies in satisfaction of such decrees for "injuries to the persons or property". The revenue of local councils derived from grants and rates was thus subjected to demands which would have exhausted their entire resources and paralysed the county and city services if counter measures by the councils had not been possible.

Dail Eireann had an effective answer. It was ordered by the Dail that there would be a clear break by local bodies with the British-controlled Local Government Board Administration and that councils would deal only with the Local Government Department of Dail Eireann. To safeguard public funds against court decrees issued at the behest of the British Government, it was ordered by the Dail that all council funds should be transferred from the Council's bank account into the accounts of three reputable persons nominated by the council and approved by the Local Government Department of Dail Eireann.

Thus local authorities broke with British administration and from the latter half of 1920 and the whole of 1921 the central control of Local Government and Public Health had largely passed from the Local Government Board to the Local Government Department of Dail Eireann. In several instances, legal proceedings were instituted against local bodies by the British authorities. Orders of Mandamus were granted by the courts but they could not be enforced. After the Truce of 11 July, 1921,

the functions of the Local Government Board were controlled by the Provisional Government and the two administrations were co-ordinated.

The observance of the July truce was imperfect. British rank and file, especially Auxiliaries and 'Tans' committed frequent and serious breaches of the Truce. Almost daily, civilians were brutally assaulted by Crown forces. On the very day of the Truce the local Military Governor made an order prohibiting the use of pedal bicycles in the city and county of Limerick and the counties of Clare and Tipperary North Riding. The proclamation provided that a permit would, in very exceptional cases, be given for the use of a bicycle within the affected area.

On 5 December, 1921, Eamonn de Valera passed through Limerick on his way to Dublin from Clare. He dined with the O'Mara family at Strand House on the Ennis Road. Afterwards as he drove to the railway station he was cheered by huge crowds on Sarsfield Bridge and all along the route to the station.

Early in the new year the Black and Tans and the Auxiliaries left the city and the country. Soon after, the R.I.C. force was disbanded.

But peace for the citizens of Limerick was short-lived. Within a few months Civil War was raging and reached the city. The new Free State troops occupied the city barracks with the exception of the New Barracks which was taken over by the anti-Treaty forces. The area of St. Joseph Street, Edward Street, Bowman Street and Wolfe Tone Street was a veritable "No Man's Land". Pinned in between the New Barracks and a Free State sniper on the tower of St. Michael's Church, Barrington Street, the people were unable to get out to buy food and provisions. The troops in the New Barracks set up a food depot in St. Ita's School in St. Joseph Street. Men and women normally working in the grocery and provision trade were



The square and burned building at the New Barracks, July 1922.



Free State soldiers at the New Barracks, July 1922.

selected to prepare and parcel food for each day's ration to the families. The bulk of foodstuffs, flour, sugar, bacon and tea was brought to the depot each morning by the troops. There was enough for everyone and there were no complaints.

The forces in the New Barracks had a prisoner who came from St. Joseph Street. He had an I.R.A. record but took the Treaty side, so his erstwhile comrades detained him in the barracks. His younger brother and a school pal were sent to the barracks with clothes for the prisoner. They went again on the next day but the barrack officials became suspicious and kept them in custody until the evacuation a week later.

The Free State sniper on St. Michael's Church tower had a perfect aim and he inflicted many injuries on Republican troops as they moved around the barrack square. To obstruct his view, a rope was stretched across the opening in the square and blankets draped from it. But the sniper was not long in picking off the rope and the drapes collapsed leaving the square exposed again to his rifle.

Meantime, during those days, many families from the "No Man's Land" area left their homes and started a trek to Mungret College, then vacant during the summer holidays. The Jesuit fathers generously opened their doors, and food and shelter were given to hundreds of women and children. The men who had accompanied them to the college, when they were satisfied that their families were safe, proceeded on to Cooperhill farm, Ballybrown. The owners of the farm were also generous in their hospitality and were highly spoken of afterwards.

The tenuous hold on the barracks by the anti-Treaty forces came to a quiet end when they retreated towards West Limerick leaving the barracks vacant and undamaged. But the people in the surrounding area carried out their own invasion and soon the buildings were crowded with men, women and children. As the evening closed in, and throughout the night, heavily laden men and women streamed from the gates with furniture, army blankets, bedding, provisions and foodstuffs. Groups came down Barrack Hill staggering under heavy bags and

awkward pieces of equipment and furniture. One man had a sack of flour on his back that weighed very heavily on him as he tottered out the gate. On the hill he remarked that he was getting used to the load and the incline down helped a lot. He planned to go up later for another bag. As he reached the level ground he began to wonder about how light the bag weight had become and looking back up the hill he saw a white trail of flour and then looked at the slack bag on his back. Some "friend" had ripped a hole in the bag with a knife. The language of the disappointed man was unprintable but not inaudible.

In the Barrack Square there were motor vans and trucks. On one van was the name of the firm J & G Boyd Ltd. New motor cycles were still in their brown wrapping covers. A dreaded Crossley Tender, still with the wire-netting 'cage', stood abandoned. Many an adult viewed and inspected it at close range for the first time — a year earlier when it careered through the city streets carrying its heavily armed Auxiliaries and Tans, people chased for safety out of its way.

When the British Army left Limerick for the last time, the residential quarters of the officers in Clare Street and on the Crescent were vacated, but only for a very short time. Families from dangerous and condemned houses in the slums moved in with their battered furniture, old bedding and few personal belongings, but with swarms of children of all ages. The exclusive residential Crescent was transformed overnight — the quality of life radically changed. Palliasses, blankets, sheets and washing hung airing and drying in the morning air from the front windows of the converted flats on every storey of the Georgian houses. Children played on the steps and swung from the bars; women loudly greeted neighbours from window to window and engaged in long chats.

The view of such extrovert domesticity was coldly ignored by Daniel O'Connell on his stone pedestal but its effect on the cultured eyes and high minds of the Sons of Ignatius on the opposite side of the Crescent could only be imagined. The Irish Free State had arrived — temporarily, at least — for these poor proletarians in their new abode in the elegant terrace of Georgian Limerick.