

MEMORIES OF

The People's Park

BY FINBAR CROWE



The Thomas Spring Rice Memorial in the People's Park.

Wordsworth immortalised the Lake District and Mark Twain the Mississippi but I do not envy them, for the People's Park was my whole world, my boyhood. Garden of Eden. Born as I was within a conquer's throw of its walls, I viewed it more as my private demesne rather than a public amenity. At night the sad plaintive whisperings of its swaying trees lulled me to sleep and in the morning the birds' chirpy matins proclaimed the new-born day.

From the main gate, alongside the City Library, to its far flung reaches, behind St. Joseph Street it encompassed miles and miles (so it seemed) of territory. Within green-railed confines the park contained all a young boy could ask for. In summer we drank from the cool springs of the water-fountain and in winter we took refuge in its red-roofed shelters. These pagoda-like structures added an exotic flavour to the surrounding undulating greenery. There were always trees to swing from, shrubberies to explore, walls to scale - things to do. And there, presiding above the flowers, shrubs, trees and stone walls, looking benignly down from his towering monument on all our doings, stood the patriarchal figure of Thomas Spring Rice.

Jim Dalton, Martin Henihan, Pat Cantillon, Jackie Stokes, Frank Fitzgibbon, Ashley and my brothers Noel and Billy were the kind of comrades a Roy Rogers might have organised into a posse. And when the "Indians" from Carey's Road (having broken some treaty or other) came raiding with their catapults, they would not allow you to

suffer the indignity of having to withdraw on your own. There they were, as loyal as ever, retreating by your side! Likewise, when some "hard-chaws" from Prospect came down and commandeered **our** playing pitch, they rallied to a man in hurling abuse from a judiciously safe distance.

It was in the People's Park that I first became acquainted with Guard Dennehy, the "school guard". I'm sure he would be known today as a school attendance officer but that impressive title could hardly have had the same psychological impact as "school guard". Many a youngster quaked in trepidation when the dreaded cry "Here comes Guard Dennehy" heralded the end of his truancy, or "mooching" as we called it.

The park seemed to have a natural attraction for boys "on the go". There were many other more favourable places such as the Docks area, the river banks and the dimly-lit billiard saloons, and all of these had their own following. But nevertheless, the park had its own regular clientele of moochers. And how those innocent fugitives betrayed their profession! The furtive look from behind a tree, the loud whisperings in shelters and the mouse-like eyes peering through shrubberies all told their own tales. And in spite of their nervous vigilance, they were never a match for Guard Dennehy. Frequently a schoolboy, explaining to his friends

how he was caught, could be heard to swear that "Guard Dennehy sprang out of a flower bed" or even "dropped out of a tree!" But who could believe a truant who had allowed himself to be apprehended?

I can still recall one frosty morning in early March when my father brought me to the park for a walk. I was recovering from a bout of 'flu and he believed that a brisk walk and fresh air were nature's elixir, and as beneficial as they were underated. On this particular day the air was crisp and invigorating, and the sound of a church bell seemed to accentuate the tranquility of the scene. Suddenly the loud clatter of running feet broke the morning's stillness. The volume of noise increased, reaching a crescendo as five ragged schoolboys burst through the gateway near St. Joseph Street. They frantically scaled the nearby Edward Street boundary wall and, glancing behind, disappeared from view. But they had not reckoned with the velocity of Guard Dennehy. Pedalling with the velocity of a Tour de France competitor, he was quickly on their heels, through the gateway, and in seconds had his bicycle propped against the wall. Then, like an Olympic champion, he hopped on the pedal, stepped on the saddle and jumped over the wall hot in pursuit of his errant "flock". Shortly afterwards the five were seen walking sheepishly in the direction of

Leamy's School, closely shepherded by the impassive policeman.

And then there was the morning, (so I was told), when "Wee-Wee" Hannon was making his way, with his box-cart, through the park. "Wee-Wee" who hailed from Carey's Road, was skilled in the art of "turning a bob" and was always fetching and carrying for someone.

Guard Dennehy was of the opinion that anything that moved in the park during school hours warranted investigation and, being suspicious by profession, he just **had** to be sure. "And what have you there?" he innocently inquired, slipping unobtrusively off his bicycle. "Coal, Guard", came the over-civil reply. "And where would you be going, then?" probed Guard Dennehy. "To the Docks, Guard", came the hasty response. Now, as the world and Guard Dennehy knew, you didn't bring coals to Newcastle - nor to Limerick Docks. "Yerra, we'd better take a look", replied Guard Dennehy, whipping a dirty coal-sack from the top of the cart. The frightened look on the three dirty faces that emerged from beneath the sacking could hardly have matched the chagrin on "Wee-Wee's" countenance. Another salutary lesson had been learned about the wiles of Guard Dennehy.

For pure musical pleasure one could hardly have surpassed the park on Sunday afternoon. On these occasions, weather permitting, the Boherbouy Brass and Reed Band gave recitals in

the bandstand, and people flocked from all corners of the city to avail of the free entertainment. When the band played in the sunny summer weather the park became a blaze of bright cotton dresses and white starched shirts. Every vantage point on the surrounding grassy slopes soon filled with young and old. A ripple of delight would run through the gathering as a trickle of youngsters from Edward Street brought music-stands and music-sheets to the bandstand, delighting in their temporary, self-important roles. One by one the musicians came on the scene with more of the acolytes carrying trumpet or trombone cases, until finally, the big bass-drum appeared. The acolyte marching beside this outdid all others in ostentation. As we eyed him with envy he would give the drum a bang or two to emphasise the importance of his role.

Eventually, when instruments had been tuned and music-sheets sorted out, all was ready for the afternoon's extravaganza. Then it was Sousa or Strauss, Benedict or Bizet, as the melodious strains floated over the appreciative gathering. With the ease of a bird in flight we went from Marble Halls to Tara's Halls, from the Blue Danube to the River Kwai, the band enrapturing all in a harmonious spell of musical virtuosity. There was little of the world that wasn't musically traversed on those happy summer afternoons.

On one of these occasions a young

flautist (known to us as "Stanners") in the front row was constantly "racing away" with the musical pieces. The conductor, George Tweedle, worked overtime with his hands and baton in trying to restrain him. As the band played the introduction to "Habanera" from Carmen, the conductor was heard, in exasperation, singing (in **sotto voce** and in perfect time with the band), "Blast you Stanners, will you take your time, Da-De-Da-Da, Da-De-Da-De-Da".

George Tweedle was an accomplished musician and conductor. (I was in St. Lawrence's Cemetery recently and I came across his grave. It brought back memories of those sunny afternoons and reminded me of the wonderful musical contribution he had made to Limerick life).

The park in those days was a great centre of sporting activities. It was the only playground for the children from the adjoining streets, and it was not unusual to find the boys of Vize's Fields and Edward Street or Reeves' Path and Wolfe Tone Street locked in a stirring match that had the partisan onlookers in a frenzy. These games were contested with all the enthusiasm and ferocity of boyhood. The pride of one's street was paramount and no effort or injury was too great in battling for that cause. And did not Eamon Cregan, to mention but one, receive his first baptism of fire in those fierce encounters? Though playing with hurlers many years his senior, the look of awe on his



O'Sullivan's Park Kiosk.

opponents' faces, as he effortlessly stroked the ball, from the most awkward of angles, straight between the two trees that acted as goalposts spoke eloquently of his prowess. Many a pipe-making sage, nodding to his fellow-pensioners, could be heard, observing "He'll win an All-Ireland yet ... there's good breeding there!"

On the soccer front there was a player from Vize's Field of whom it was said (probably by himself) that he had once played with Blackpool B team. Consequently, he had a certain "reputation" among the park players and we all focused our attention on him when he played. From time to time he showed some neat touches but more often than not he would solo up the field having left the ball twenty yards behind, or rise majestically to head a corner that came in ankle high. With our youthful credulity we never doubted his story but our respect for Blackpool B began to wane. And then we discovered that he had never even been as far as Castleconnell! We consoled one another by protesting that we had never **really** believed his story.

During those times the Men's Confraternity Retreats were held in the month of May at the Redemptorist Church. Many young men stayed in boarding houses in the vicinity of the park. They came mostly from rural areas to serve their apprenticeships in the drapery, grocery and hardware businesses in the city. After the 6 a.m. mass on weekdays, the "lodgers" usually repaired to the yet unopened park, climbing over the walls, to pass the time away before work in a sporting contest. At 7.30 a.m. many drowsy residents woke to the raucous shouts of these early morning encounters.

Recalling that period now one could not fail to mention Sam Browne. Sam, who lived in St. Joseph Street, was in no way bigoted when it came to games. As those who played with him will recall, he had unilaterally revoked the "ban" long before the G.A.A. came to its senses. When Ireland played for the Triple Crown, Sam would come thundering up the street on his way to the park, with a horde of youngsters from Emmet Place and Bowman Street at his side, interpassing some object that was only remotely oval-shaped. Then when Limerick played in a Munster Final Sam and his cohorts commandeered hurleys (or any bit of stick that would pass for a hurley) and pucked every stone on the road on their mad dash to the park. During the soccer season he was to the fore again, soloing up the street with a tin-can at his feet, an enthusiastic chorus of "Pass it, Sam", "Play the wing, Sam", trailing in his wake. Rounders, pitch-and-putt, cricket - you name it, he played it. And marshalled the rest of us to play too! Sam Browne was the quintessential all-round and all-the-year

round Limerick sportsman.

Limerick always had its quota of gambling "schools" and the People's Park provided an obvious location for this activity. Though card schools had their followings, they were subject to the vicissitudes of the Irish climate (people having to kneel or sit in order to play) and their popularity as an outdoor activity suffered accordingly. But the pitch-and-toss school was different. It was a game for all seasons, and even the meagre shade of a leafless tree offered sufficient shelter during inclement weather. In fact people often became so engrossed that they hardly noticed the elements. These proceedings became so intense at times, that disputes were often quickly settled by a bout of fisticuffs. When the cries of "Play to the mottie!" "Watch the fliers!" or "Bar 'em!" rang in the air, the park was no place for weaklings.

On Sunday mornings the school could swell to thirty or forty adults, and the younger boys increased their "choice" of words as passions and tempers became enflamed. An adjacent youngster was occasionally hauled in by a superstitious player to toss for him in the fervant hope that fortune would smile favourably on him. If he won he was praised for his skill and spoken of as "a gentleman and a scholar". When he lost, however, retribution was swift. He was unceremoniously ejected, assisted on his way by a string of expletives.

But the weekday school was not of the same quality. It only attracted layabouts and messenger boys, who seemed more interested in killing time than in learning and perfecting the skills of the game. A mutual pecuniary embarrassment probably accounted for their indifference. In matters of gambling there is nothing like money to concentrate the mind. However, they were always well positioned, whether by accident or design, to be envied by those of us who were still trudging to secondary school. In those days most pupils left after the Primary Certificate and some of these held that it was density rather than ability that induced others to remain on. After all, they argued, if you had any brains at all, wouldn't you leave that place of torment at the first opportunity? I often felt they had a point.

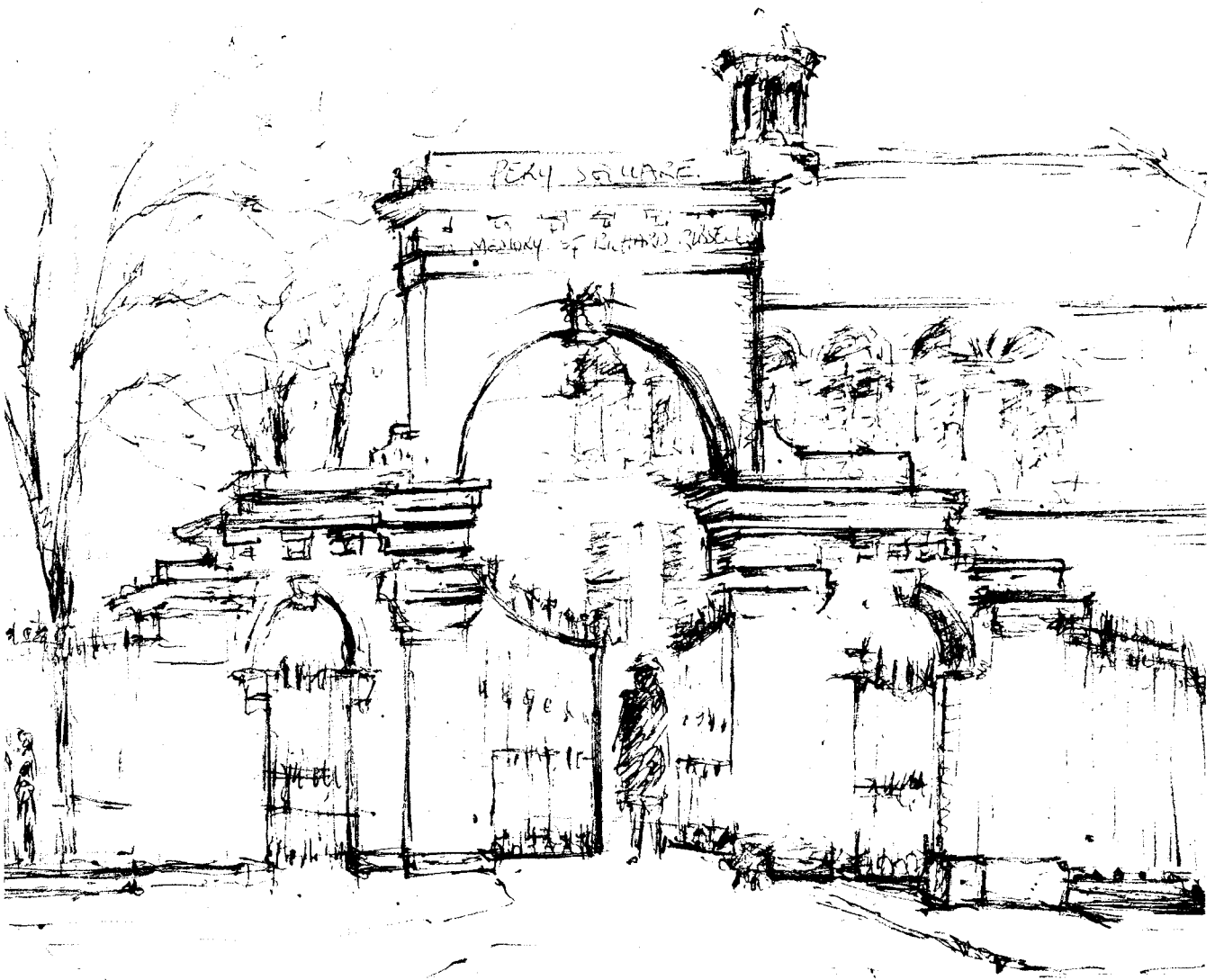
One afternoon in May, a friend of mine (in Intermediate Certificate class at the time) was making his way back to school after lunch. On passing a card school in the park a derisive shout came from a scruffy messenger boy: "Will ye look at yer man in 'longers', **still** going to school ... he must be an awful eejit!" Between jeering and laughing the others could hardly play their cards. Their day was made. I should mention, too, that the "awful

eejit" has since become a widely acclaimed novelist and short story writer. And Michael Curtin could teach any of them a thing or two about cards as well! Yet for all that I'm sure he, like myself, still envies them those carefree, lazy days of long ago.

In a city so preoccupied with religion as Limerick was, when everyone was first and foremost a Catholic or Protestant, it did not then strike me as odd that a wall should be labelled Catholic or Protestant. And so it was. The wall dividing the park from St. Michael's Church of Ireland School was known as "The Protestant Wall". Though it looked as ordinary as any other boundary wall to me, it, nevertheless, went by that name. We spent many a summer's evening on the wall watching the white-clad ladies and gentlemen of the Protestant community playing tennis or croquet. The older folk, conservatively dressed, chatted away, about Empire and Royalty, or so we imagined. It never occurred to us that anything as mundane as the cost of food or the price of shoes could have crossed their minds. They were different — their white attire confirmed it and "The Protestant Wall" spoke silently of the divide. I pass that way nowadays and notice that the march of time has left its inevitable mark: the mortar is loose here, a stone is missing there. But "The Protestant Wall" was more than mere mortar and stone in those bygone days!

The avant-garde Park Rangers, with their impressive uniforms and professional appearance are indicative of the changes brought about by time in the People's Park. In the 1950s they were simply Park Attendants (or "Park men", as we called them) and their caps were their only badges of office. That, however, did not induce any of us youngsters to take chances with them. Whether we were climbing walls or swinging off trees, the dreaded cry "Here comes the "man"" would send us scampering to the nearest exit, fearful of being caught. One such "Man" was called "Oompah" (I don't know how he got his nickname), and he appeared to lack all the attributes that were necessary for the job. He was about sixty, slow and short-sighted. But he was cunning. He seemed to be behind every tree, in the middle of every shubbery, and if you climbed a wall, you almost expected him to be on top of it. And to cap it all, he had a "summons" book. I need hardly mention that in those days everyone dreaded having a guard call to the door. You'd be disgraced!

Well, there you might be, throwing stones up into a chestnut tree or swinging off a branch and suddenly Oompah would appear. Now, we knew he couldn't catch us but, very slowly and deliberately, he would take out his "summons" book, point at one or two



Main entrance to the People's Park. Drawing by James O'Halloran.

of us, and start writing, moistening his pencil once or twice in his mouth for effect. We were terrified! We had it on good authority (Oompah himself had told some youngster or other) that many of those he had "summoned" were sent to Glin Reformatory, and Glin, as we all knew, was somewhere on the road between Purgatory and Hell. We ran off hoping he hadn't recognised us or that he would relent. What would we do if we were summoned? And a guard knocked at our doors? Oompah was the bane of our young lives. And then it happened. Jackie Stokes, on one of these occasions, was injudiciously close to Oompah (or so we thought) but he recognised the "summons" book for what it really was - a wartime ration-book! Perhaps it was the prominent

stripes across the cover that gave the game away but Oompah never quite recovered from the blow. His cover was blown and he retired shortly afterwards. We filled many a shoebox with conkers after that.

When I recall those days now I realise that the People's Park has always been, in the real sense, a community centre. Every year, from April to September, the citizens of Limerick make full use of it. Old age pensioners, animated with spring vigour, foresake their smokey winter refuges and head for the newly-painted park benches. Old women, with a store of gossip to impart, seek out their old cronies to share their hoarded news. Mothers, too, flock there with their children, knitting and chatting as they drop a

stitch or raise a scandal. And all the while gambolling children continue to sport and play, as they have done for more than a hundred years. Above all, on his lofty perch, Thomas Spring Rice the man who helped reform a corrupt Corporation, still maintains his stony gaze.

But more than all that it has been **MY** park, my whole youthful world. It occupied all my days and filled my nights with dreams. New friendships grew there with every fresh budding of its trees. The fragrance of its flowers cast a magic spell. And, though the "fresh woods and pastures new" of life have had their rewards, the memories of those bygone days will always stir happily within me.