

# MICHAEL JOYCE:

## SQUARERIGGER, SHANNON PILOT AND M.P.

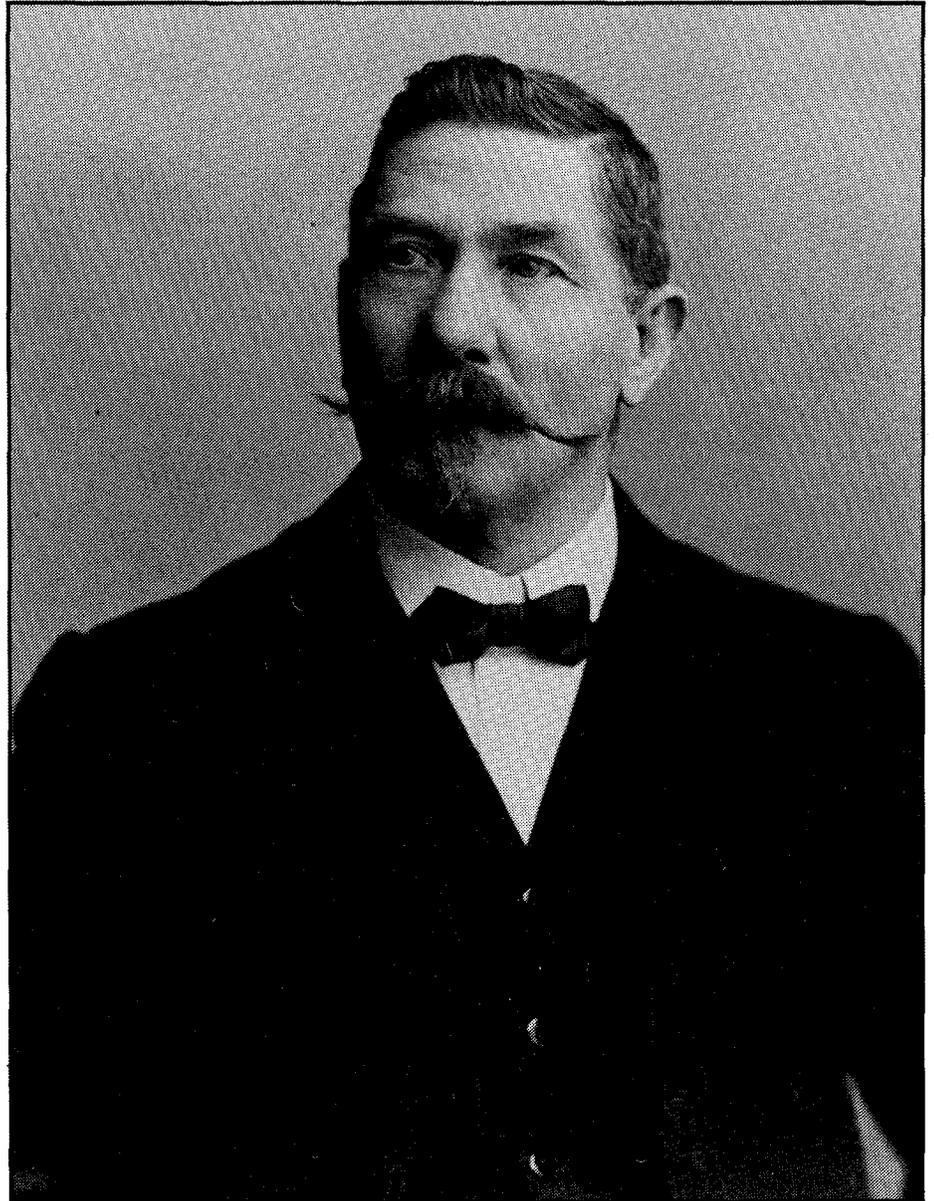
BY BRIAN DONNELLY

**W**ithout doubt, the most remarkable Shannon Pilot was Michael Joyce, square-rigger, alderman, member of parliament, mayor of Limerick and president of the United Kingdom Pilots' Association. He was born on the 4 September, 1851, at Merchants' Quay in Limerick City. This area had been the centre of a prosperous corn export trade in the early nineteenth century, but was soon to be eclipsed in importance as the shipping centre of the city by the opening of the new floating docks down river two years after Joyce's birth.

Three generations of his family had been associated with the sea and pilotage. A John Joyce was given a pilot's licence by the harbour authorities on 9 January, 1834. The entry in the pilots' licence book tells us he was aged 36, 5'7" tall, with a pale complexion. On the 25 October, 1847 a Richard Joyce, 21 years old and 5'7" tall, with a fair complexion, was issued with a licence. He would appear to have been the son of John Joyce and the father of Michael.

Joyce was educated by the Christian Brothers in their schools at Bridge Street, Pery Square, and later at Sexton Street. The *Limerick Leader* was later to comment that he was not, as a result, tainted by the so-called 'national (school) system'.

At the age of fourteen, Joyce joined the barque *Red Gauntlet* on his first voyage. During his subsequent career at sea, he was shipwrecked four times, losing all he possessed on each occasion. In November, 1869, he joined the *Herald* at Limerick on a voyage to carry coals from Cardiff to Rio de Janeiro. About 150 miles west of the Bay of Biscay, the ship encountered a hurricane and began to take water. The crew of an Italian barque, sinking in the vicinity, were drowned within sight of the *Herald*, and Joyce and some of his companions were eventually saved by a French brig. He had another narrow escape from death while serving on a sailing boat carrying a cargo of timber across the Atlantic. The vessel capsized during a gale and Joyce and the rest of the crew clung to the waterlogged derelict for five days without food or water until picked up by another boat. He was twice wrecked in the North Sea, once when his ship was blown ashore by a storm and on another occasion when his vessel went aground due to the



Michael Joyce, M.P.

removal of all buoys and light-ships during the Franco-Prussian War. Joyce was later to recount that as he was so unfortunate at sea his family used to insist that he stay as close to home as possible!

In the early 1870s, Joyce returned to Limerick to serve his apprenticeship as a river pilot, and on Friday, 8 March, 1878, presented himself to the Pilot Committee of Limerick Harbour Commissioners for examination as a candidate for a pilot's licence.

The committee noted that he was 26 years of age, had been five years at sea, had made several foreign voyages and produced enrolment in the Naval Reserve.

He was examined by the harbour master and, having answered very satisfactorily, the Committee considered him competent and recommended him for a licence. Apart from the references to Joyce's interview on that Friday in March, 1878, which are preserved in the Pilot Committee minute book of the date,



*'The "People's Parliament", an epoch in Limerick's municipal history'.*

the chairman's notes have also survived, from which it appears he was judged particularly suitable to be granted a licence and thus join the ranks of the Limerick pilots bringing ships up the river to the city from Cain's Island, and piloting them down the river to Scattery Island and even as far as Loop Head.

Henceforth, he seems to have played an active part in local nationalist and social affairs. He was, together with the Rev. Robert Ambrose and others, one of the founders of the old Sarsfield Branch of the National League in Limerick. Joyce occupied the chair at the founding of Garryowen Rugby Football Club, and played in the first fifteen for both Garryowen and Limerick County. He was also a prominent member of St. Michael's Temperance Society.

The Local Government Act of 1898 widened the franchise for local elections and caused an upheaval in local politics. The first municipal election after the Act, in January, 1899, saw mass participation on a level unequalled in local elections prior to that date. A poet in the *Limerick Leader* commented sarcastically:

*The masses have now got a rise,  
and their power we must recognize,  
so we'll take off our coats,  
to capture the votes,  
of the rabble we used to despise.*

Joyce went forward for this election as a

Labour candidate for Custom House Ward, pledged to a democratic programme. He headed the poll in his ward, and the Labour interest was to secure a majority of 8 men in the new Corporation, which was hailed by the *Limerick Leader* as a 'People's Parliament' and an epoch in Limerick's municipal history.

In the general election in the following year, Joyce went forward as a candidate for the Irish Parliamentary party. His opponent was Francis Kearney, a well known Limerick solicitor, whom the unionist *Limerick Chronicle*, on 29 September, 1900 described as 'not only a solicitor of standing, a gentleman of birth and education, but a brilliant and successful student of politics, with the power, unlike Mr. Joyce - of being able, by oratorical ability combined with forceful arguments, to influence even the assembly of the first gentlemen, of the United Kingdom'. Kearney was also solicitor to the Harbour Board.

When addressing his supporters in Limerick on 1 September, Joyce pointed out that '... he did not presume to be a gentleman either by birth or education, but he presumed to be a gentleman, as good as any man of birth or education, by the mere fact that he was an honest intelligent and upright workingman ...'

When the results of the election became known, Joyce, with his '... hardy, weatherbeaten countenance, with the bluff hearty manner which charact-

erises the sailor man the world over ...' was found to have won an overwhelming majority over his unionist opponent, having received 2521 votes to Kearney's 474. The *Limerick Chronicle*, which had supported Kearney, commented after the election that '... it is over now, and though we do not believe in Mr. Joyce's politics, or that he is the best man Limerick could have chosen, we do believe in his honesty ...'

Joyce was in many ways typical of elements in the composition of the Irish Parliamentary Party in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries - men of comparatively humble origin who found themselves thrust from local to imperial politics within a short period.

Many years later, 'Quidnunc' of the *Irish Times* recounted Joyce's entry into the House of Commons when '... Mr. Joyce commended himself to the tender mercies of the suave Speaker Gully of those days and asked him to guide him through "the shoals and quicksands of parliamentary procedure", a touch which was greatly relished and loudly applauded. Mr. Joyce was soon dubbed "the Pilot of the House" and became immensely popular ...'

For most of the following two decades, Joyce served as an alderman of the Corporation; on two occasions mayor of Limerick, and he also served as a member of parliament for the city. He played an active role as a member of the

Limerick Harbour Board and of its Pilotage Committee. The Board was to derive considerable advantage from Joyce's position as a member of parliament. On 8 January, 1907, for example, '... on the motion of Sir Thomas Cleeve, seconded by Mr. Hayes, the secretary was directed to write to Mr. John Redmond and the President of the Board of Trade suggesting that the Mayor should be selected to act as a Commissioner regarding the Enquiry into Lighthouse Administration ...'

In 1909, the Limerick Harbour Commissioners were anxious to have the Admiralty re-survey the Shannon, and wrote to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty to that effect hoping that '... the efforts of Alderman Joyce, our worthy Member of Parliament and to whom we tender our warmest thanks - will still be maintained and that eventually the Admiralty will be led to recognize the reasonableness of our request ...'

A letter survives among the harbour records, dated 17 July, 1912, from Joyce in the House of Commons to John Power, the secretary of the Limerick Harbour Board, regarding the efforts of the Irish party to minimise the damage to Irish trading interests, resulting from an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in the country.

Almost two years later, foot-and-mouth disease still posed a problem. At the Limerick harbour Board meeting on the 10 May, 1914, '... a letter was read from Alderman Joyce M.P. and a telegram from the Department of Agriculture explaining why the boundary line at present fixed could not be altered so as to open the Port of Limerick for the shipment of cattle owing to fresh outbreaks of foot and mouth disease in the north of the County Cork ...' It was in the area of pilotage legislation, however, that Joyce was to leave his mark in parliament.

Joyce became active in the United Kingdom Pilots' Association (founded 1884), and together with the President of the Association, George Cawley, led a deputation to see Winston Churchill, which resulted in an order being signed for a departmental committee on pilotage to begin work in 1909. Joyce was a member of the Marine Advisory Committee of the Board of Trade and gave evidence during its 25 sittings between November, 1909, and April, 1910, on the state of pilotage on the Shannon. The crowning effect of the committee's work was the Pilotage Act of 1913, which was a considerable advance on previous legislation, particularly in respect to freedom from illegal pilotage, a restriction of the issue of pilotage certificates, and better representations of pilotage committees. When Commander Cawley died in 1910, Joyce succeeded him as president of the U.K. Pilots' Association.

The Great War heralded the end of Joyce's political career, as well as that of



*Michael Joyce, as sketched by 'Matt'.*

other notable local supporters of the Irish Parliamentary Party. The year, 1914, had seen the false dawn of the Home Rule Act eclipsed by the outbreak of war.

It was a time of personal tragedy for Joyce, with the premature death of his second eldest son, Joseph. His eldest son, Richard, had emigrated to America, and later fought in France with the 165th United States Regiment. Joyce once again experienced the trauma of shipwreck when, as a passenger to Holyhead on his way to attend to his parliamentary duties at Westminster, he was aboard the S.S. *Leinster* when she was torpedoed near the Kish lightship, a month before the end of the Great War, with the loss of 500 lives. Joyce was later praised for his coolheadedness and assistance to his fellow-passengers.

The approach of the general election at the end of that year saw the Irish Parliamentary Party in disarray as a result of the rise of Sinn Fein. Joyce, by then 67 years old, intended to contest the city seat with the Sinn Fein candidate, P. Colivet. His election meeting, on the 25 November, 1918, was however, disrupted by Sinn Fein elements, and Joyce decided to stand down to save the city from turmoil. P. Colivet was returned unopposed. On 16 December, at a meeting of the Harbour Board, Mr.

Morley (the secretary) and the high sheriff proposed ... a vote of thanks to Alderman Joyce for the services he rendered to the Board and the City whilst representing them in Parliament. The Mayor put the vote, and on behalf of the City and himself joined heartily in it ...'

Joyce's term as Harbour Commissioner ran for another year. In August, 1919, he applied for and received a renewal of his pilot's licence, stating, however, that he did not intend to claim any earnings from the pilot fund. His eventual retirement from the Harbour Board in January, 1920, was a cause of universal regret. Joyce retired as president of the United Kingdom Pilots' Association in 1923. He had been well liked and highly respected in that office.

Joyce maintained his interest in cultural and social affairs over the next two decades. He was chairman of the Michael Hogan (Bard of Thomond) Memorial Committee which erected a cross over the Bard's grave in May, 1933. Joyce had known Hogan well and was able to confirm that a portrait painted by Dermot O'Brien for the committee 'was a living picture'.

Joyce was for many years a member of Limerick City Division 550 of the Ancient Order of Hibernians (Board of Erin). The A.O.H. had developed in the 19th century from older Catholic secret societies and was re-organised by Joseph Devlin around 1905 into a powerful nationalist political machine providing support for the Irish Parliamentary Party. The A.O.H. was the most powerful defender of nationalist interests in Northern Ireland following the disintegration of the I.P.P. in the rest of Ireland and retained allegiance to the constitutional nationalism of the old Party. Devlin was president of the A.O.H. until his death in 1934. Joyce was prominent in the branch of the Joseph Devlin National Memorial Committee and was instrumental in the presentation of a bust of Joseph Devlin to the Limerick Municipal Art Gallery in 1939.

The *Old Limerick Journal* of Spring, 1988, recalls how in later life he regaled his friends with stories of Australia and other far-away places and of the distinguished people he had met through his public life. T.P. O'Connor introduced him to Mark Twain as 'the Shannon Pilot to the Mississippi Pilot'. He also met John McCormack, Ada Rehan, the famous Limerick-born Shakesperean actress, Eva O'Connor, the Australian soprano and, of course, all the leading parliamentarians of his day. Limerick could hardly have had a better ambassador.

Michael Joyce died at his home, 'The Moorings', O'Connell Avenue, on 9 January, 1941, in his 90th year.

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