

# THE LIMERICK WATCH

BY KEVIN HANNAN

I well remember hearing old people recounting stories of the Watchmen and their nightly vigils patrolling the badly lit city streets and lanes, intoning the passing hours with a sing-song drone and adding the monotonous assurance that all was well. Some of the stories seemed wonderful at the time, though I often had my doubts about their veracity. In more recent times, however, it was my good fortune to possess, for a few days, an official watchman's diary, covering a period in the 1880s, and some bits and scraps from earlier years, some of the entries not alone endorsed the fantastic tales that I had heard, but regaled me with others that might well have had their origin in the *Arabian Nights*.

I nearly got bogged down in my researches into the origins of the Limerick watchmen and believed that they may have had their beginnings after the Irish Peace Preservation Act of 1814. Seamus Breathneach, in his book, *The Irish Police* quotes Sir Charles Jeffries, who dates police history in Ireland from that date. Sir Charles suggests that "... modern police history begins not in Britain but in Ireland with the passing of the Irish Peace Preservation Act". Sir Charles seems to have had a good grip of the situation: our next door neighbour has always – and even up to the present day – believed that the uncivilised Irish were in far greater need of a police force than themselves. However, Dr. Chris O'Mahony, in his *Old Limerick Journal* article "Limerick Night Watch 1807-1853", published in autumn, 1987, dated the establishment of the Limerick Watch as 1807:

The origins of a night watch in Limerick City date from 1807, when the parish of St. Michael, or Newtown Pery, was placed under the management of twenty-one commissioners. This new body, with the cumbersome title of "Commissioners for the improvement of the Parish of St. Michael", was given responsibility for "paving, cleansing, lighting and watching" the parish.

The loss of many of the records of the Limerick Night Watch is nothing short of a disaster. Most of these – the diaries – survived in a basement apartment of the old Town Hall until they were discovered about twenty years ago by a few employees who took the liberty of removing some of them, together with irreplaceable Health Committee books. Some people to whom they were shown were so impressed by the excellent



Inspector J. MacNamara, Limerick Night Watch, in the 1890s.  
Limerick Museum.

copperplate script and the fascinating entries that they purchased them, possibly as curios. Others were sold to persons with an interest in local history (but lacking in common decency and civic spirit); others were given as "presents".

The eminent historian, Fr. Mark Tierney, was fortunate and quick-witted enough to rescue most of a diary from a shop in the Irishtown where the pages

were being used as wrapping paper for sweets being sold to children!

Those who possess these documents would do well to reflect on their indefensible retention of such an important segment of the city's heritage.

Now that Limerick has a regional archivist, I would appeal to anyone reading these lines who has a watchman's diary to leave it with the archivist, Dr. Chris O'Mahony, at the Granary, so that it

will be available to the general public.

In the first decades of the nineteenth century, the Watch was confined to the old city. At that time St. Michael's Parish Commissioners appointed their own watchmen to patrol New Town Pery. The watch-house was in Glentworth Street. After the amalgamation of the old town and New Town Pery in 1853, the watch was controlled by the Corporation.

According to the records of 1842, there were 30 regular watchmen, 8 supernumeraries, and a superintendent. The headquarters at that time, known as the watch-house, was in a rear basement of the premises of the Chamber of Commerce in Rutland Street. This well known building was taken over as the Town Hall in 1846, and the watchmen were in occupation of their watch-house until 1921, when they were disbanded.

The watchmen, now regarded as legendary figures, were a colourful body who were for ever at the receiving end of jibes and practical jokes. Their drab uniforms, a long frieze coat with cape, and a high crowned derby, or "bowler", with a shining leather band instead of the usual silk ribbon gave them a kind of pied-piperish appearance. They carried a ridiculous long pole, with a heavy iron ferrule at one end. When this was struck heavily against the flagged footpaths, the ringing sound carried a remarkably long distance. When an emergency arose and assistance was required from their colleagues or others this pole-banging was used as a means of communication. Michael Hogan, The Bard of Thomond, when describing the shindy in the public house created by "Drunken Thady", tells us that:

*The watch came to the scene of battle  
Proclaiming peace with sounding wattle.*

A little earlier, in the 1840s and 50s, the watchmen carried a kind of rattle called a "creek". When a member of the watch used this to summon help, he was said to have "sprung his creek". I found the following examples of this novel procedure in a fragment of a diary from the 1840s:

*Hartigan "sprung his creek" at Arthur's Quay, near Harvey's, after seeing a naked body in the water. Burns and Flynn arrived and Hartigan foolishly tried to get in the corpse with his stave and tumbled in but was kept afloat by his greatcoat long enough for Flynn to drag him out at the slip half-dead ...*

*Mungovan sprung his creek after getting a belt in the neck from a rough he laid hold of thinking he was drunk ...*

*John Ryan sprung his creek after he got a fierce kick from a woman of the street he was trying to arrest ...*

*Kirby sprung his creek in Scabby Lane after hearing loud screams and howls coming from a house.*

N.P. Fogarty, quotes some interesting entries from an 1840 diary, in a paper read to the members of the Old Limerick Society:

*Meehan brought a woman in the parish cart, stupidly drunk*

*Hand cart brought in, found in Glentworth Street.*

*McMahon reports iron bar missing from railings of Miss Doyle's house in George's Street.*

*Ryan reports a sailor having fallen into Russell's Rock and drowned.*

*At ten o'clock Murray reports that a man had fallen into the river at Honan's Quay and drowned.*

*John Lynch sprung his creek on Arthur's Quay in consequence of a woman of the street having fallen into the river. She was providentially saved and brought to the watch-house for protection.*

*Hartigan sprung his creek in Denmark Street in consequence of a riot. The watchmen and police came up and took four men to be charged.*

Apparently, the "creek" disappeared later in the century, as there was no reference to it in the later diaries. Hogan would surely have mentioned it in his famous poem instead of the "sounding wattle".

I found many amusing entries in an 1880s diary:

*Heffernan found a goose wandering on Thomond Bridge. After several peggings he snaffled the beast and brought it to the pound in Athlunkard Street ...*

*Moran followed the sound of unmerciful screams in Nicholas Street to a house where, in the hall, he was taken off his feet by someone flying down the stairs. Moran lit his candle [apparently candles were part of their equipment] and adventured up the stairs to a room where he found a woman with her head almost severed. He summoned help and brought the body on a door to Barringtons. [In those days doors, which could be easily lifted from their L-shaped hinges, were used to convey injured people to the hospital]*

*O'Brien brought a woman off the street, paralysed in drink, on the parish cart to the watch-house ...*

*Hanrahan arrested a bold rascal caught in the act of stealing the widow Wharton's two fat pigs in Repeal Alley [Repeal Alley was off John Street] ...*

*O'Brien reported Clancy's horse kicking the stable door like mad in Gaol Lane Bow [now Emly Place] ...*

*O'Brien reported the padlock missing from Eliza Unthank's door in Mungret Street ...*

*Healy reported coming on two strong fellows throwing the carcass of a donkey into Mahony's area in John's Square. They fled towards Palmerstown as he approached.*

*Healy met four sailors on Matthew Bridge bringing one of their crew on a door to Barrington's. He appeared to be dead. They had fished him out of the river at Honan's Quay where he had been too long to be taken out alive.*

In those days, the great backwater at Arthur's Quay was the Port of Limerick

and provided berthage for all vessels before the downstream quays and dock were ready in the 1850s. There is no accounting the great numbers of sailors who were drowned boarding their ships, which were often six deep out from the quay. Most of the victims were drunk, but even if sober, the chances of surviving an involuntary immersion between ship and quay or between two ships were very slim indeed.

Contrary to popular belief and despite the social cleavage, there was good co-operation between the watch and the police. Sometimes the valuable interchange of information was of great value to one side or the other. The citizens generally were kind and helpful to the watch, though in the latter part of the last century, and well into the present one, the poor fellows, usually well past middle age, were baited by the young sporting 'bloods' who came to the city from Dublin and Cork during regattas. A watchman's stave was sometimes regarded a more important trophy than a silver cup awarded for a win on the river. The legendary Garryowen boys were also the terror of the watchmen. The unknown versifier in the famous song "Garryowen 'n Glory" records:

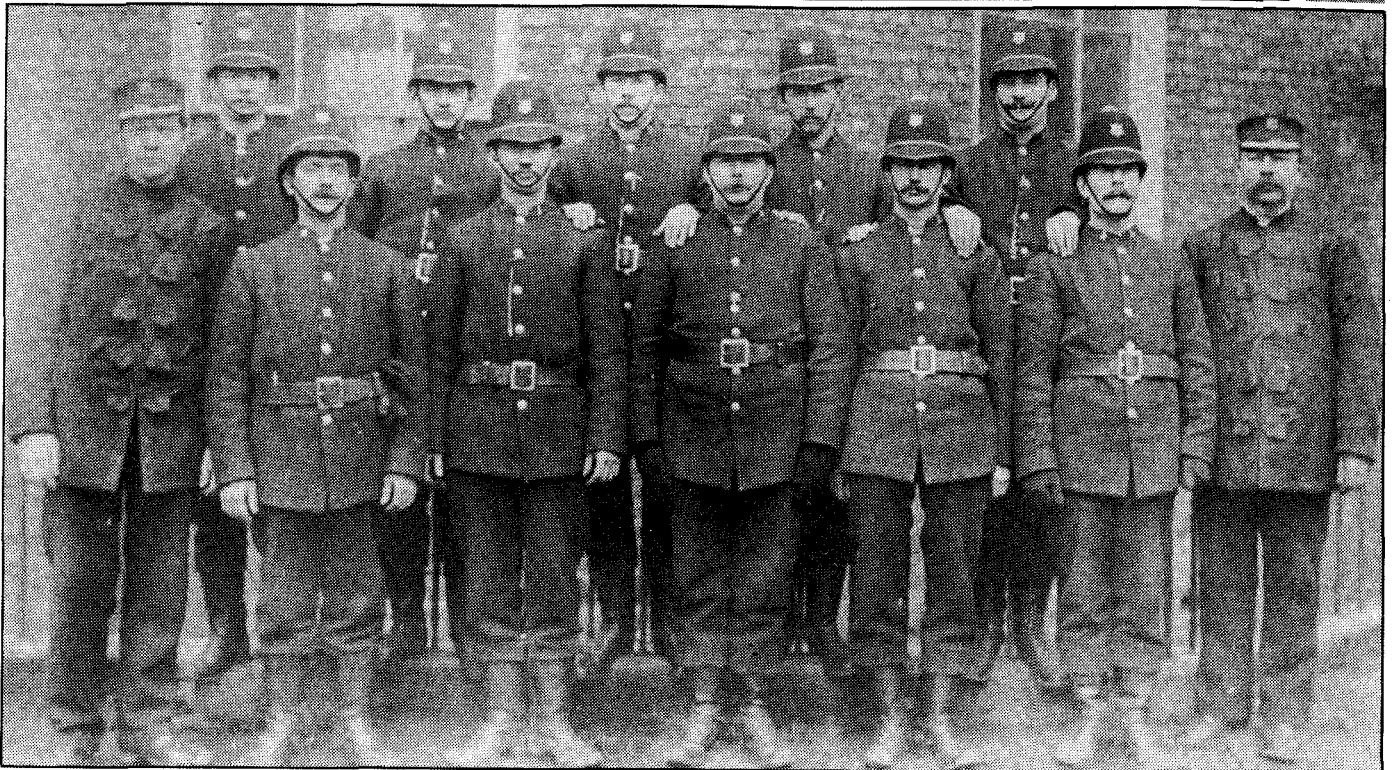
*We'll break windows, we'll break doors,  
The watch knock down in threes and fours,  
Then let the doctors work their cures,  
And tinker up their bruises.*

"Hooleys", wakes and weddings never went off too well unless a watchman or two became "lorded" at the function. These events, which usually went on all night, never failed to attract a watchman on the beat, especially in the winter time, when even the protection of the heavy frieze was often rendered useless against the hostile elements.

The local papers of the last century afford ample evidence of the watchman's partiality for the "drop". A correspondent singing himself "Ratepayer" (such people usually considered themselves more entitled to consideration than non-ratepayers) wrote to the Limerick Chronicle in January, 1876:

*Would the member of the night watch, who was so drunk in a lane off George's Street a few mornings since, and was roaring so lustily and amusing himself by throwing his hat and staff about the lane, confer a favour on his fellow citizens in general, and on an unfortunately light sleeper in particular, when he takes a slight drop to overcome him again, to make less noise, so that those worshippers at the shrine of Morpheus may not be disturbed.*

Then again, in April the following year, at a meeting of the Limerick Corporation, a letter was read from a member of the Night Watch, requesting the Corporation to recoup him for his hat, which had been stolen. It appeared that the man had fallen asleep while on duty, and that his hat had been "lifted" off his head.



*Limerick City Night Watch, 1902 (Limerick Museum). Back Row, P. Hayes, R. Gleeson, P. Sheahan, S. Meany, J. MacNamara. Front Row, J. Gilligan (Inspector), S. Leo, W. Lynch, J. Hayes, J. Lahiff, J. Bourke, and J. MacNamara (Inspector).*

Several members were of the opinion that the man should not be retained on the watch, declaring that it was such proceedings that had brought the force into disrepute.

The man was retained, but was ordered to replace the hat at his own expense.

The watchmen's tour of duty started at 8 p.m. during the winter months, and at 9 p.m. during the summer. They usually worked in pairs, though on occasion single patrols are mentioned. Though much maligned and ridiculed in many quarters, the force rendered great service to the citizens and prevented much depredation by nocturnal marauders.

Their headquarters – the watch-house – with its earthen floor and gloomy cells, was spartan in all its features, down to the very heating system – a braizer, or devil, which, owing to the smoke and fumes, had to be placed outside the door, where almost all its heat was dissipated into the atmosphere.

In 1898, some members of the Corporation initiated a movement to disband the watch, and no doubt this move would have succeeded were it not for the accession to power of the so-called "Labour Party", led by John Daly, who were in a position to insist on the Corporation retaining the old service. At this time, the watch was re-constituted, and the name changed to "Limerick Night Constables". However, this badge of respectability was for the statute book only; up to the very end the night constables were known only as the watch. A more positive and desirable transformation, however, was to be seen in the smart constable's uniform. The long staffs were replaced by batons, and their communication system advanced from

the banging of the ferruled staff to a simple whistle. They were sworn in as ordinary constables and were endowed with the same powers as the police.

They were relieved also of the old duty of crying out the hours, but they still engaged in their old "sideline" of calling early workers. This was a valuable service before the widespread use of alarm clocks, and was much more positive. It was also of some value to the watchman, who was paid three pence, and sometimes a little more, per week, for the service.

The watch was finally disbanded with the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922. The event was hardly noticed by a people who were so much on edge after the dramatic events of the Black-and-Tan War and the Civil War, and the emergence of the new state.

The following satirical verses appeared in the *Limerick Chronicle*, in November, 1875:

*If England boasts her noble guards,  
And Germany her Uhlans;  
If Scotland views with fond regard  
Her Highlanders in tartans;  
Old Limerick, too, may view with pride –  
May ask what guards may match  
That gallant group, by danger tried,  
Her famous old night watch.*

*Through many a land their praise has passed,  
Through many a clime their name;  
A brilliant halo's round them cast,  
Undying is their fame.  
All visitors from foreign lands  
Unsatisfied depart  
Unless a sight of this brave band  
Has gratified their heart –*

*And artists, too, quite anxious seem  
Their features to portray,  
And of their photographs they deem  
The sale would right well pay.  
For all throughout the world wide  
Such men 'twere vain to seek –  
In aspect, dress, and martial stride  
They're perfectly unique.*

*In brawl and scuffle, row or fight,  
in this our ancient town,  
On many a dark and dismal night  
They've won a high renown;  
Upon their beat they never sleep,  
Nor do they e'er repair  
To sheltered nooks and doorways deep  
To smoke and ponder there.*

*But all night long, through fair and foul,  
They wander to and fro,  
And here they peep and here they prowl  
In search of hidden foe;  
With lusty lungs and piercing tone  
The fleeting hours they roar;  
"Pasht three", they cry when 'tis but one;  
"Pasht one" when it is four.*

*The temperance, too, I must extol,  
Of these old Limerick rangers –  
To liquoring up and alcohol  
They are teetotal strangers.  
And hence it is they're never found  
Incapable and tipsy,  
Or stretched unconscious on the ground –  
Ah! no, they hate the whiskey.*

*But why need I their praises chant!  
On every side they're rung;  
Nor shall they to their graves depart  
Nonhonoured and unsung.  
Long, long they'll shine in history's page,  
Amid time's greatest heroes;  
Their fame shall live in every age,  
And lasting be as Nero's!*