

Michael Hogan and the Paupers' Graveyard

by Jim Kemmy

Michael Hogan, the self-styled Bard of Thomond, was born on 1 November, 1832, at the New Road, Thomondgate, Limerick. His father, Arthur, was a skilled woodworker and was, according to his son, a quiet, well-mannered and refined man, known for his wit and love of music.

Hogan tells us in his memoirs that he went to the local Christian Brothers School but that his teacher failed to interest him in any subject. He says that he passed his time in scribbling rhymes and lampooning other students, and that he left the school after one year just as wise as he entered it. He wrote:

I never tired of hunting up traditions. They possessed an overwhelming charm for me. I felt an especial fondness in visiting fairy forts, old ruined castles and abbeys; often sitting for hours among their weird shadows, bathing my imagination in the weirdest poetic dreams; but I never for a moment dreamed of how I was to get through life or encounter the world for a living.

Hogan, who suffered from poor eyesight, served in apprenticeship to his father but never became a proficient craftsman and only worked at the trade for a brief period during his adult life. He became a mill worker and was employed by the firm of Russell at Newtown Pery and Lock Mills. He also served for two periods as custodian of the Turf Quay and caretaker of the Island Bank, in the employment of the Limerick Corporation. The Bard lived all his life in his native city, except for three years in America, between 1886 and 1889.

Apart from the decade between 1868 and 1878, when he wrote and published his *Shawn-na-Scoob* pamphlets, he was never able to earn his living as a writer. And the money he made from this venture soon vanished, when the pub he had opened at his new home at Thomond Cottage, New Road, Thomondgate, failed and he had to take up residence in a tenement.

Michael Hogan grew up in Thomondgate beside the "Paupers' Graveyard" in Killeely and witnessed the worst horrors of the famine as a boy and as a young man. When, in 1849, a new cemetery was opened up in the adjacent townland of Ballynantybeg, the Bard continued to observe the daily burials. The pain and terror of the relentless procession of death



Michael Hogan (1832-99), the Bard of Thomond.

never left his mind. Towards the end of his life, he wrote in his memoirs:

I have a fearful recollection of those dreadful years of devastation. I remember seeing the famine-and-plague pits open in the fields of Killeely where thousands of coffinless corpses were flung in heaps over each other from the pestilential pens of the numerous workhouses where they were poisoned with rotten Indian meal food and deadly medicine ... The Irish people melted away with a vengeance in those terrible years of hunger and plague and the land became a wilderness dotted with graves.

The English writer, Spencer T. Hall, visited Limerick at the time of the famine

and in his book, *Life and Death in Ireland, as witnessed in 1849*, he, too, gives a harrowing picture of the burial-ground:

The cholera just before that time was so rife in the city, that out of the population of 50,000 not less than 500 cases occurred in a week; and I was soon afterward shown one vast grave, in a field on the outside of the city, near the poor-house, into which nearly two thousand bodies had been gathered in less than a month - having died of that and other diseases having their origin in dirt and destitution! The plan of this enormous grave was as follows:- A hole was first dug, large enough for six coffins, which after being placed together, without the slightest ceremony,

were covered with the earth from another hole dug in turn by the side of the first. Thus the heap had gone on swelling till as large as one of the tumuli of the ancient inhabitants of these islands. Nor was such mortality confined to Limerick. In one of the neighbouring unions - I believe that of Newcastle - the contractor for coffins had at that time engaged to supply not less than 800 per week! It was at the same period that a child died of starvation on its mother's back, in the open streets of Limerick, having eaten nothing but a little watercress for twenty-four hours.

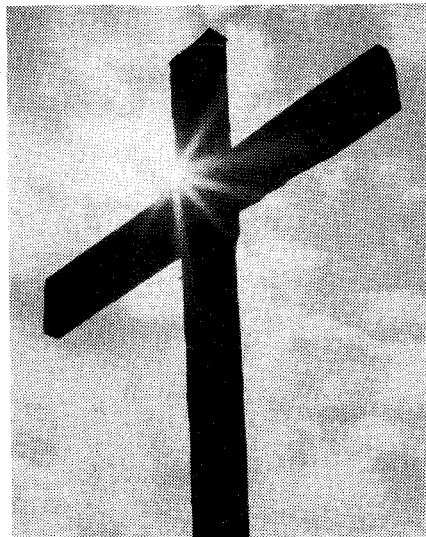
If the place at such a time had any attractions of gaiety, he must have been a man very different from myself who could have sought or participated in them. Sorrow was the medium through which alone every feature could be viewed; and this must be my excuse should the critical reader think I have not thrown into the picture sufficient light and liveliness.

Michael Hogan wrote his best poem, 'Drunken Thady', in his twenties and it was published in a collection of his verses, *The Lays and Legends of Thomond*. In this book he also wrote a famine poem, 'The Living Skeleton, A Vision of the Famine Year, 1847':

*'Twas in ruthless Forty-Seven,-
When the plague-fraught air was riven
With the sound which harrowed heaven,
Of a famished people's cry -
When the famine fiend was formed,
All with tenfold horrors armed,
And our godless rulers, charmed,
Saw their Irish victims die;
While Europe, all alarmed, heard
the wail that tore the sky
A dying Nation's death-groan, ringing
up to God on high.*

*Then Fancy's wizard mirror
Showed me many a shape of terror,
As my heart locked deep in horror,
Heard the living wail the dead;
While raging hunger stung them,
And the plague-fiend stalked among
them,
And, like autumn's sick leaves,
flung them
In the dust's unhallowed bed,
Where, grappling with the demon,
they fiercely howled for bread,
As their raving souls turned maniac
ere from earth accursed they fled.*

*Thus to see my country lying,
Like a helpless infant dying,
I wept in anguish, crying,
God has lost his love of right!
Yet, 'twas but a mad temptation
That with quick reverberation
Crossed my soul's black desolation,
Like the red flash of the night -
As the lurid-pinioned lightning smites
the ghastly face of night,
Making darkness still more awful
with the terror of its light.*



The tall wooden cross in the Paupers' Graveyard.

*Sick and heart-sore from my weeping,
Back I lay, o'erwearied, sleeping,
Gloomy thoughts and sorrow steeping
In a pensive dream of rest;
As a day which clouds deform
With alternate rain and storm -
At its sinking, calm and warm,
Slumbers in the silent West;
Pillowed on the crimsoned ether -
thus I lay, in quiet rest,
When a vision, strange and dismal,
tore the spirit from my breast.*

*In a place of shadows sunless,
Barren, sombre, treeless, tuneless,,
Weird, sepulchral, starless, moonless,
Yet not wholly wrapt in gloom;
For some cold, unnatural glimmer, -
Like a March night dim, and dimmer,
Or a wintry moonbeam's shimmer,
Through a crevice in a tomb -
Glinted on this realm of terror -
this dreary land of dole,
And grisly spectre-shadows - where the
vision led my soul.*

*All my heart, with horror shrinking,
On a thousand dread things thinking,
I advanced - each footstep sinking
In the corpse-befatted ground;
Where, uncoffined and unshrouded,
Lay the blackened bodies crowded, -
With a pall of blue flies clouded -
In the festering graves around;
While meagre birds of darkness, and
lank-sided beasts of prey
From the putrefying members tore
the livid flesh away.*

The spectre of the Limerick Poorhouse haunted Hogan all his life. He earned a precarious living as a casual labourer and watchman and was often in financial difficulties. At different times his wife and his mother were forced to seek refuge in the workhouse. On occasions the Bard himself barely escaped having to enter the dreadful institution.

In the sixth number of his *Shawn-na-Scoob* pamphlets, published in 1874, Hogan vented his pent-up spleen on the place and on its board of guardians:

*The Poorhouse's a monster that's never
done cramming,
And still crying out for more plunder
and famine;
A Glutton protected by statesmen
illustrious,
To gulph the life-sweet of the struggling
industrious;
A genial retreat for lewd scoundrels
and b-hes,
And young ones picked up from the
dykes and the ditches
What a wholesome employ for paid
favourites and flatterers,
To keep watch and ward o'er street
blackguards and batterers!
An emporium of vagabonds pampered
and idle,
Whose thoughts, deeds and words have
no conscience nor bridle.
We thought, by the meaning and sense
of its term,
It was made for the feeble, the old and
infirm;
Yet it sweeps in the produce of city and
country.
Not to feed a poor hundred but make
a few gentry ...
No conscience nor counsel can make
them do better
Than to cheat to the end, and be all
damned together.*

Hogan fell on even harder times in the last years of his life, and he continued to live in tenement rooms. At least it could be said that he managed to stay outside the grim, high walls of the workhouse. He died on 20 April, 1899.

For long after the famine, the term 'pauper' continued to be applied to the hapless, penniless people who were forced to seek shelter and sustenance in the City Home, as the workhouse later came to be known. Burials also continued in the graveyard for a century, right up to its closure in the late 1940s.

The sight of a pauper's funeral was a pitiful spectacle. The corpse was dressed in the cheapest possible brown habit and placed in a rough deal coffin. Two fellow paupers then heaved the coffin on to a hand-cart and pulled it along the Shelbourne Road thoroughfare on its short journey to the cemetery.

There were no pulpit or press eulogies or even mourners to follow the tumbrel. Paupers were buried in unmarked graves without benefit of clergy or dignity. The manner in which the interments were carried out without any form of religious ritual whatsoever found expression in the colloquial phrase: 'high money, high mass; low money, low mass; no money, no mass'. The paupers' lot was a lonely, third-class ticket to the 'Yellow Hole', or St. Brigid's, the cemetery's official title.

Up to its closure, many thousands were buried there. Apart from a stark wooden cross, the graveyard is devoid of any ornamentation or artifact to mark the place out as a cemetery. The commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the famine is an appropriate time to put in place a belated memorial to the unsung people who lie buried there.