

The Faction Fighters

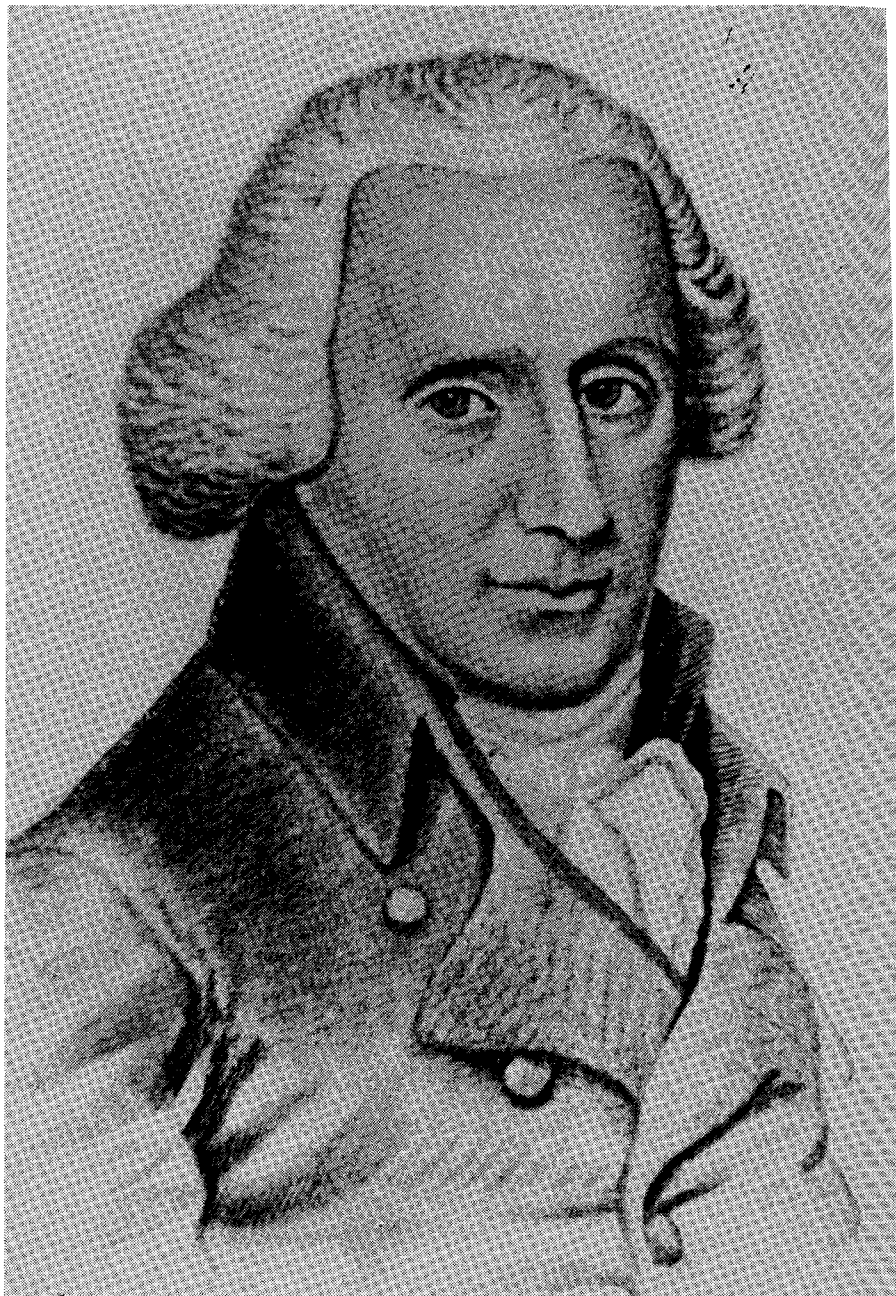
by Kevin Hanman

How often have we heard the remark: "It wasn't a Christian thing to do", after someone has just heard of a person, or persons, being brutally ill-treated? The remark implies surprise that Christians could be involved in such an outrage. There should be no surprise. From Cain to Hitler, taking in Count de Sade, Ivan the Terrible, Joe Stalin, Al Capone and Bugs Moran, Christians have been guilty of the most appalling cruelties and barbarity. One has only to study the unbridled savagery of the Inquisitors, or the massacres by Oliver Cromwell, to note the similarity of their conduct to that of savages who never heard of Christ.

Though Christianised since the sixth century, all too often Ireland seems to have ignored the fifth commandment. From the dawn of history Irish people have been slaughtering each other. Stories of massacres are mentioned here and there in the annals, but it was not until newspapers became popular in the late eighteenth century that reports on faction fighting in Ireland were read with relish by those who were able to read.

From its inception the *Limerick Chronicle* reported the fights, sometimes devoting only a line or two, even in cases where deaths occurred, but in later years with greater detail and more colourful language, especially when reporting on some of the main engagements between the notorious factions in East Limerick and North Tipperary. The great doctor, Sylvester O'Halloran, who started work in the County Infirmary in 1766, was induced to depart from his main speciality, ophthalmology, and embrace the study of head injuries, by the large numbers of persons with serious head injuries being brought in from the rural hinterland almost daily. Indeed, it is certain that there was no other doctor specialising in the treatment of head injuries in the United Kingdom who had a greater number of subjects to assist his studies. O'Halloran's own remarks on the subject are of special interest and importance:

I have no less than four fractured skulls to trepan on a May morning. There is no place in the habitable globe that for a century past offered such an ample field for observation on head injuries as Ireland in general; this Province of Munster in particular, for our people, invincibly brave, notwithstanding the cruel oppressions they have suffered for a century past, and highly irritable, soon catch fire; a slight offence is usually



Dr Sylvester O'Halloran.

followed by serious consequences; sticks and stones, and every other species of offence next to hand are dealt out with great liberality.

Though faction fighting in the old style is a thing of the past, a short distance across the channel dreadful encounters frequently take place at football matches between rival gangs. The participants in these engagements are euphemistically referred to as "hooligans". These are usually denied weapons which they would dearly like to have, but they inflict as much injury as their bare hands allow.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the passions of the East

Limerick faction fighters needed no arousal from the rivalry on the playing pitch; their killer instincts were for ever on a knife edge. Old sores were never allowed to heal and animosity and rancour between families and groups were religiously nurtured.

While the defence of the sixth commandment was the main priority of the clergy, circumstances often compelled them to share their allegiances in defending the fifth. Indeed, some priests courageously risked their lives in their efforts to separate contestants.

Perhaps the longest lasting of all the feuds was that which erupted all too frequently between the "Three Year Olds"

and the "Four Year Olds". In July, 1874, the English *Daily News* (always eager to give the limelight to the stage Irishman) dealt with the origins of the groups. The explanation of one of their journalists is interesting:

As we neared Pallas I was reminded that I was on classic ground, and that Old and New Pallas and Pallas Green formed the scene of the never to be forgotten feud of the "Three Year Olds" and the "Four Year Olds", the tradition whereof hath a rich and racy savour. Readers of the Daily News will hardly need to be reminded that the historic vendetta commenced with a dispute concerning the age of a bull, one disputant maintaining that the animal was four, while the other insisted that he was three years old. The matter was settled, or rather put on the level of a mighty pretty quarrel by a desperate fight, wherein one of the contestants was either slain or grievously injured, whereupon his case was taken up by his family and friends, and a feud inaugurated which lasted many years and led to the deaths of a considerable number of persons besides continual diversion by way of faction fighting.

The *Limerick Chronicle* of September, 1878, reported on the following engagement:

A faction fight of a very serious and sanguinary character took place yesterday at Cappamore fair, between the factions known as the "Three Year Olds" and the "Four Year Olds". It appears that the father of a family of the



Fairs were often marked by faction fighting.

"Fours" came into contact with a sire of the "Threes" in the early part of the day. The old enmity was renewed by cross sparring at each other, innuendos, etc. Closer and warmer the quarrel became, until finally a hand-to-hand conflict ensued between the two, lasting upwards of an hour, and terminating in the downfall of the representative of the "Fours", with his eye knocked into his head. The victor was immediately set upon by the remainder of the "Fours" party who had come to the scene to witness the conflict between the two veteran leaders, but like their fellow savages in North America, they instantly fell on the conqueror, whose life they would eventually have taken had not the "Three" party opportunely arrived and delivered their respected patriarch from the clutches of his inveterate enemies. It is needless to add that as always and

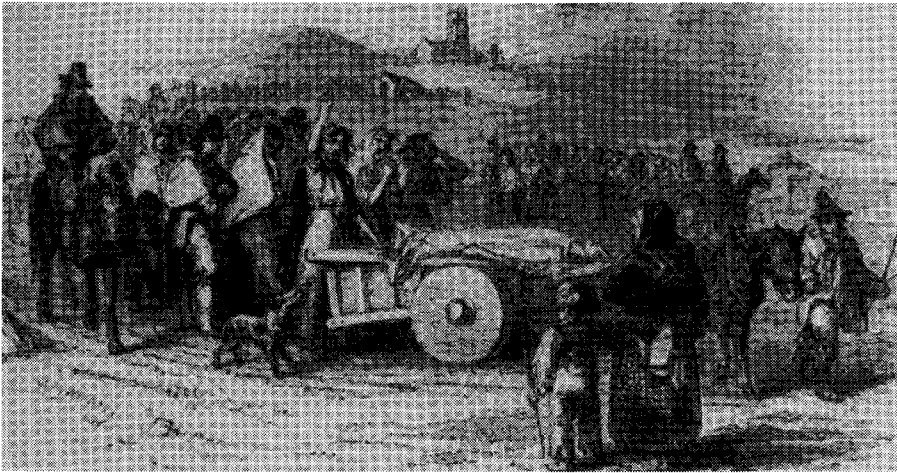
ever at these faction fights sticks and stones were freely used on each others head. All the police in the district were called into requisition and eventually succeeded in separating the contestants, but not before many were gravely injured.

About this time a reconciliation between these two bitterly opposed factions was brought about by the parish priest of Pallas, and peace and harmony reigned for the best part of a year, and many gatherings where fights would normally be expected to take place passed off without incident; but the peace was eventually broken and pacts and promises smothered by the old war-like passions.

Of course there were many other groups of factionists who had their own axes to grind, and others who bore no ill-will or lasting grudges towards each other,



The start of a faction fight.



Faction fights often ended in death.

but were at each others throats over some on-the-spot difference of opinion. Then you had feuding neighbours whose holdings adjoined and who were for ever at war over their boundary fences.

In July, 1878, a savage fight took place near Old Pallas. It all started over the trespass of a cow. A feud of long standing had existed between the two families involved and it required only a very lame excuse to ignite the fuse.

It was a fine Sunday morning when the parties, six men on each side, confronted each other. The weapons consisted of pitchforks, spades and knives. An official report of the fight tells us that: "One of the parties was knocked down and attacked in an inhuman manner by one of his antagonists, who deliberately ripped up his abdomen with a knife and tore out his entrails, several of which were cut. His life is despaired of". What an understatement! Surely such appalling injuries were beyond healing at that time. The report goes on: "A second man had his head battered into mummy and his jaw fractured from ear to ear. A third member of the same family received similar injury, his head being reduced to pulp. The father of one of the families was beaten with great ferocity, his head being smashed to bits with stones. A son of his is quite badly injured. Father and son are both confined to bed in a critical condition. Three of the other family are in bed, and the man who had his guts torn out is sinking fast".

There can be no doubt that all twelve participants in this dreadful conflict were murderers of the first order, yet there was a tolerance shown to all faction fighters that is hard to understand. In this case it is highly unlikely that any survivors - if there were any - had enough life left in them to be charged with anything.

To judge from the leniency of juries in cases where unbridled savagery resulted in death or serious injury, it would appear that the crimes were acceptable as legitimate pastimes. The following colourful account of a trial of faction fighters from Old Pallas in the *Daily Telegraph* of September, 1870:

In Old Pallas they have a pleasant fashion of varying the dull monotony of

rural life. At least that is what we infer from the reports of certain cases recently tried before Mr. Justice Barry at the Limerick Assizes. There are rival factions in New Pallas called the "Three Year Olds" and the "Four Year Olds" between whom exists an enmity as ever set Montague and Capulet at each other's throats. At pig fairs, after the worry of business, the "Three and Four Olds" yearn for a little light recreation; and the particular kind of it that best suits their humour is a little mutual skull-cracking. Occasionally they "waste" a man by murdering him, and then he is not only of no use to the faction, but he inflicts on them a posthumous wrong, in the case of a criminal prosecution. According to the evidence, which was ample, the accused beat his antagonist to the ground and pounded away at him until he was dead. The sympathies of the jury were deeply moved in favour of the poor murderer, with whose legitimate amusement the base, bloody and brutal government interfered. They found the prisoner not guilty - the judge cynically remarking that it was no wonder that we had so many widows and orphans in the country, when jurors returned such verdicts. Then came the turn of a few "gay Boys". Unfortunately they do not appear to have killed anyone, so the jury, with righteous indignation, convicted them for taking so tame a part in the affair in New Pallas, and they were sentenced to three months imprisonment. Yet it was not truly their fault that they left their opponents off with their lives. The evidence shows that when they determined to be avenged after the pig fair they knocked a lot of people. One witness admirably testified that it was a quiet affair, only lasting half an hour. "There was not much noise, it was all hard work. One of these worked like a devil and helped himself to a bite of an ear".

In convicting them the jury seemed to have shamefully overlooked the honest efforts made by the prisoners to merit a full honest acquittal; it is true they did not succeed in committing a single murder, still they had not neglected any of the preliminary preparations. One

witness, for example, swore they were armed properly - "they had", said he, "sticks and stones and everything handy to break a skull with" - though with reference to one of them, he afterwards admitted that he did not think he had a stone, or indeed, "anything in his hand but his fist". Everybody, however, agreed, though nobody was killed, "it was a good fight". Nevertheless, the jury would have a conviction, and were unmoved by undoubtable proof which showed that although one of the accused had not actually slain his antagonist, "he had helped himself to a good bit of his ear". The poor fellow was not a murderer, but a mere cannibal, so there was no hope of getting him off altogether, and he had to submit to sentence of three months imprisonment.

The Newcastle Race course - now the Castletroy Golf Course - was for many years the arena for bloody encounters between rival gangs. It is said that no meeting ever went off there without a murder or two. After a number of factionists were killed during meetings in 1867, the owner of the course refused to lease it for horse racing in 1868, and for ever after. Thereafter, the races were held at Ballinacurra. In October, 1868, a fight took place there in which two powerful men from Blackwater, father and son, were so badly injured that Dr. Peppard "could not pronounce their lives out of danger". The victims had been set upon by about ten or twelve seasoned factionists who pinned them to the ground, while others pounded their heads with "large stones which they had taken from a nearby wall". On the same occasion 37 persons were treated in Barrington's Hospital for serious injuries sustained in a number of fights there, the staff, nurses and doctors, working into the small hours.

Today the old feuds are forgotten, and the descendants of the old factionists find it hard to accept that their ancestors were prepared to maim and kill each other over silly arguments or disagreements.

During the last century there were fights of a different kind in and around Merchants' Quay during the days of open voting at election times. In those days voting took place in the courthouses. Voters had to declare - more or less in public - the candidate of his choice. Persons of a timid nature often felt compelled to vote in a manner completely at variance with their own political views. Others with courage enough to vote according to their conscience were often set upon by supporters of an opposing candidate. Such a voter was often accompanied by a number of well chosen stalwarts, armed with the traditional blackthorns or ash plants. Thus violent confrontations took place despite the attendance of a goodly number of armed constabulary. Things are much quieter today, and gang warfare - apart from occasional outbreaks of brutal killings and maimings among gangsters and paramilitaries - is now a thing of the past.