

GREEN DUST

Ireland's Unique Motor Racing History
1900-1939

By
BRENDAN LYNCH

PORTOBELLO PUBLISHING

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publishers prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Unauthorised reproduction of all or part of this book is forbidden, without written consent.

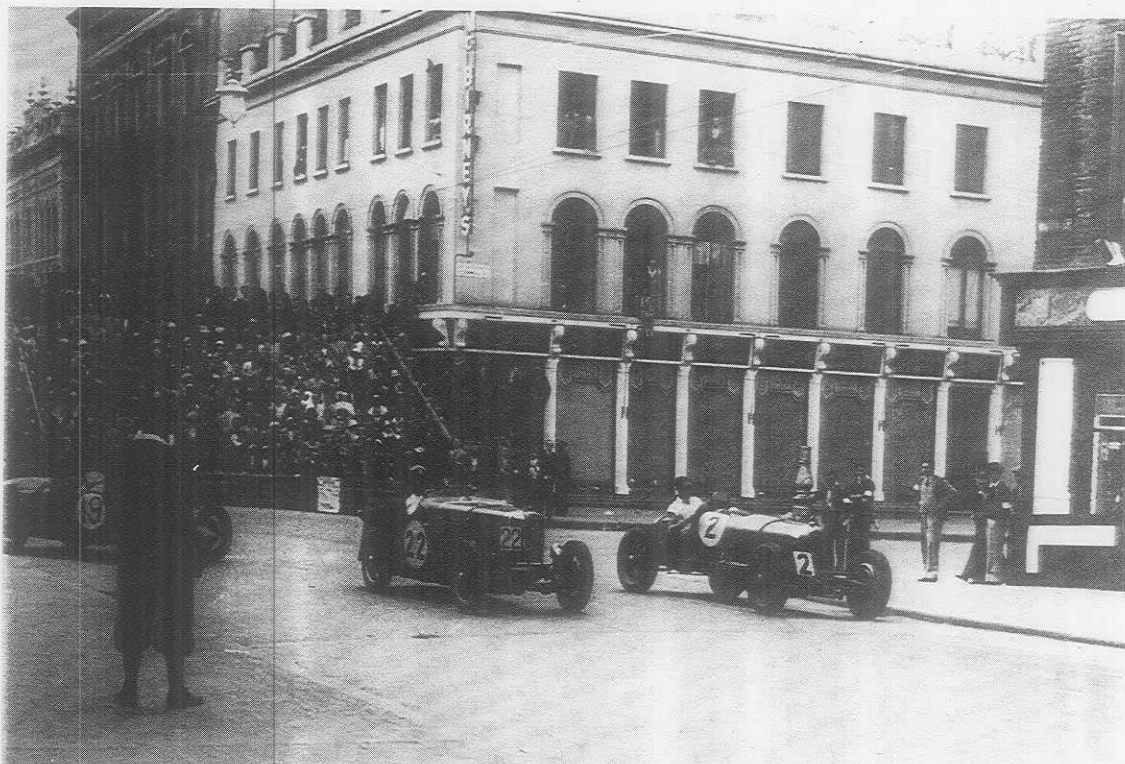
© Brendan Lynch
First Published 1988
Portobello Publishing,
13 Kingsland Parade, Portobello, Dublin 8.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Lynch, Brendan
Green Dust, Ireland's Unique Motor Racing
History 1900-1939
I. Automobile racing-history
I. Title
ISBN 0-9513668-0-7

DUBLIN CITY COUNCIL	
Date Recd.	Jan 89
Int. No.	BB
Acc. No.	1369435
Class No.	796.72Ir
Price	15.40

Set in 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ on 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ pt. Souvenir
Designed, Printed and Bound in Ireland
by Three Candles Printers Ltd.,
Aston Place, Dublin 2.

18. LIMERICK ROUND-THE-HOUSES (1935-1938) *Le Mans Winner triumphs*



Opening Limerick Grand Prix 1935: winner Fontes (2) passes Ayrton (22) and O'Boyle.

The first 1900 Motor Tour to Killaloe attracted hundreds of spectators from Limerick but apart from such events as the 1909 hillclimb won by the Rev. Archdall, the historic western city had seen little motoring competition. The success of the first 1934 Bray round-the-houses changed all that, however, and local enthusiasts were quick to exploit the new interest in town racing, which had proved very popular on the continent since the inauguration of the Monaco Grand Prix in 1929. With the evidence of strong local support for the event, the Irish Motor Racing Club announced that the first Limerick Grand Prix or Cuairt Luimnighe race would take place on Bank Holiday Monday, August 5, 1935.

The twisting 2.76 mile circuit which incorporated the main thoroughfare, O'Connell Street,

ran from William Street to Roxborough Road, Carey's Road, Rosbrien Road, Punch's Cross and back via O'Connell Avenue and its two O'Connell Street chicanes to the sharp right hand turn into William Street. A special grandstand was erected at the O'Connell-William Streets junction (entitled "Sarsfield Corner" for the race) with capacity for 200 spectators at five shillings a head, compared to three shillings and sixpence paid by the 600 who filled the sideline seats at the start area.

A footbridge was constructed across the circuit at the junction of O'Connell Street and Cecil Street and a special Sweep was launched based on the race results. Local hotels and restaurants embraced the opportunity for new business with special "racing breakfasts" while one hotel advised patrons to "See the race in comfort — verandah seats 5/-" and the proprietor of the billiard parlour over Burton's invited offers for the

GREEN DUST

unrivalled view from his saloon's windows. Visitors poured into Limerick and according to the Limerick Leader, the race attracted the largest gathering of cars and spectators ever seen in the western city. Many were in a buoyant mood as they celebrated Limerick's victory the preceding day over Cork in the semi-final of the Munster Hurling Championship.

The 151-mile race over 55 laps attracted 25 starters who were flagged off in groups of five by the formally-robed Lord Mayor James Casey. The South African Pat Fairfield amazed the packed pavement audience with the acceleration of his white ERA, which had already won at Dieppe and Donington, as he led away the fastest group which included 21-year old Englishman of Spanish extraction, Luis Fontes, fresh from his victory in the Le Mans 24-Hour race, and Buddy Featherstonhaugh in the Maserati with which he had won the 1934 Albi Grand Prix. Fairfield's sleeved-down 1100cc machine was the smallest-engined ERA to race in Ireland.

Featherstonhaugh had been the Whitney Straight teammate of Irishman Hugh Hamilton and he quickly made himself at home on the Irish streets to trounce the scratchmen until a blown gasket made him a spectator. Gasket trouble also saw the early demise of the works Austin of Stanley Woods, and limit MG driver R. Marsh led easily until lap 32 when he was overtaken by David Yule (Austin). The Dubliner's lead lasted but one short lap before he in turn was passed by Tallaght winner Jack Toohey in his Ford.

All this time Pat Fairfield had been flying through the field and he set fastest lap at 67.35mph as he climbed from fourth on lap 32 to first three laps later. However, the ERA flier then dissipated his advantage with a pit-stop and some less-than-fast lappery after being assured that he had the race in his pocket. Flushed with his French success, young Alfa-mounted Fontes had other ideas and from sixth on lap 40 he progressed rapidly to second place, 72 seconds behind Fairfield, with only 10 laps left. Four circuits later he had halved the gap and with one lap remaining he swept past the surprised South African to win by 200 yards at 64.91mph.

Near the finish, former leader Toohey and Charlie Manders were baulked at the chicane and the latter badly damaged his Adler when forced into the railings. Behind Fairfield, Peter Whitehead took third place in his Alta ahead of French Davis (Fiat) while Toohey eventually finished fifth just ahead of David Yule. The weather had been excellent and the carnival atmosphere and the excitement of cars racing

through their streets made the round-the-houses event an instant hit with most Limerick folk.

Another hit was racewinner Fontes, whose rapid driving was well matched by his ability to celebrate. Sammy Davis recalled that with his studious appearance few people would take him seriously as a racing driver — "And they were utterly confounded when he drove as one pursued by devils and continued to do so until the race ended. When the excitement of the race was over, the South American section of Luis would take charge, transforming the bespectacled 'student' into the wildest man ever contemplated in Hollywood's western — and the art of making whoopee gained a new height record!"

So successful was that opening race that the event was awarded international status for 1936. The Grand Prix took place on August Bank Holiday Monday and attracted such well known cross-channel drivers as Arthur Dobson and Peter Whitehead in ERA's; the irrepressible Anthony Powys-Lybbe (Alfa Romeo), lady driver Eileen Ellison (Maserati) and Prince Bira in his ERA "Remus". The latter described the city circuit as the most difficult course on which he had ever raced but despite his misgivings he returned fastest time of 2 minutes 27 seconds around the 2.76 mile circuit in Saturday's early 5.30 a.m. practice. However, the driver who best exceeded his handicap expectations was Belfast's A. Hutchinson who was lucky to get an entry for what was only his second race.

The race was overshadowed by a fatal accident to one of the cross-channel entrants, the 22-year old Duke of Grafton. He was a comparative

Stanley Woods, 1935 entrant.



Fontes making

newcome
ience of s
fast 3.3-l
from Cha
the Duk
practical
as powe
who just
to the st
and the
flat" said

The 2
one-min
handicap
who too
Ellison i
short di
overtoo
Roxbor
corner
very qu
tended
Bugatti
the air
fuel tar
machin
Duke.

With
car by
the str
to rac
poure
those
helpe



Fontes makes "whopee" with Fairfield (left).

newcomer to racing and though he had experience of speed trials this was his first outing in the fast 3.3-litre Bugatti which he had just bought from Charles Martin. Like 1935 winner Fontes, the Duke was a popular figure and a great practical joker but his lack of preparation of a car as powerful as the Bugatti worried Prince Bira, who just before the race started drew his attention to the stiffness of the Bugatti's shock absorbers and the almost flat tyres. "Don't worry, I like them flat" said Grafton.

The 24 cars were started in two groups with a one-minute interval which counted as part of the handicap, and among the first group was Bira who took an immediate lead from Dobson. Eileen Ellison in her Maserati led the second pack but a short distance from the start the Duke of Grafton overtook the Cambridge lady as she slowed for Roxborough Road corner. This was a deceptive corner as, though it looked as if it could be taken very quickly, it concealed a sharp bump which tended to fling cars to one side. Grafton's blue Bugatti hit the bump at speed and jumped into the air before crashing across the road where the fuel tank hit a post and exploded, enveloping the machine in flames and trapping the unfortunate Duke.

With his clothes ablaze he was dragged from his car by a brave marshal just as the leaders sped up the street, and for the next two laps drivers had to race through a wall of flame as blazing petrol poured across the track. The hazards of racing in those days before the courageous Jackie Stewart helped introduce fireproof overalls and safer fuel

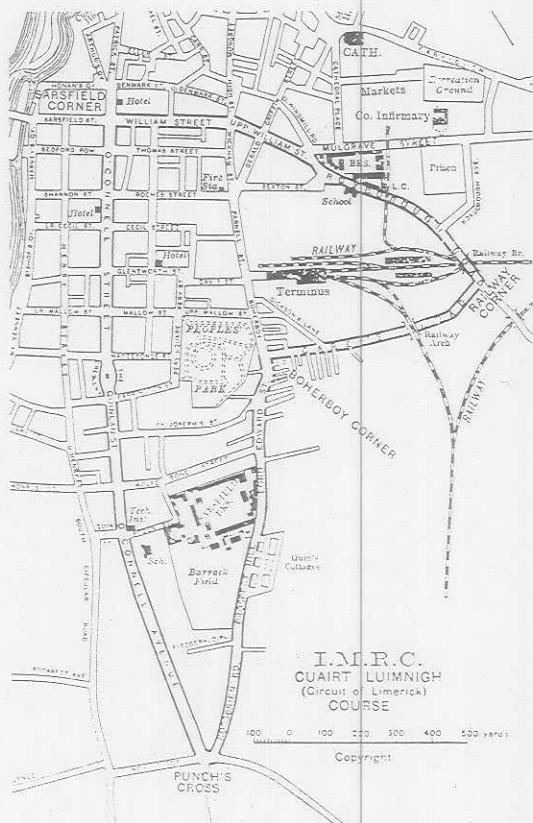
tanks were eloquently recalled by Bira afterwards — "My first reaction was to brake hard in order not to run into the bonfire, as with a full petrol tank two inches off my back I would not have much of a chance to come out of it whole. On the other hand, if I stopped altogether, my race would have come to an end. I had to think fast and second by second the flame was licking higher and higher. The only way was to risk taking to the pavement again like at Monaco, so holding my breath and closing my eyes, I felt as if I had made myself small as I shot by. I distinctly felt something warm licking the back of my silk overalls and when I opened my eyes again I realised that I had made it. Looking back, I saw Arthur Dobson coming through the great cloud of black smoke."

Despite his preoccupation with the accident, Bira soon had his right foot hard down again. He needed to, as Dobson clung tenaciously to the blue ERA and lapping at 70mph the pair raced nose-to-tail for many laps. Twice Dobson forced his white machine ahead but Bira retook him each time and eventually began to pull out a narrow lead. At half-distance the little Siamese led by three precarious seconds but having misinterpreted a "Steady" signal, he pressed on as

Hutchinson wins 1936 race.



GREEN DUST



hard as he could, and harder, alas. On lap 36 he braked too late for the sharp Punch's Cross hairpin and he swept into a wall, terminally damaging the front of his car.

Limit Dubliner George Mangan (MG) was meantime making the most of his 11-lap allowance but he was gradually reeled in by Belfast MG rival Alan Hutchinson, who had originally been a reserve driver and only got into the race when another entrant withdrew. Hutchinson in turn was threatened towards the end of the race by Dobson but alerted by some sensible pit signalling he increased speed to maintain his lead, as Dobson dawdled for a few laps in response to sadly misleading messages from his pit.

Charlie Manders and Ivo Peters were also going well in second and third places at this stage but with only a few laps left the latter went out with clutch trouble while Percy Maclure overtook Manders. New Zealander T.P. Cholmondelay Tapper who had taken over Eileen Ellison's Maserati (which had previously seen action at Avus and Monaco with Lord Howe) was also motoring briskly, using the pavements as he strove to make up ground and narrowly missing a Civic Guard at William Street corner where

Jack Toohey had earlier pirouetted in his Ford Special.

With two laps left, Dobson's pit crew realised their error and frantically waved him on but though he speeded up, the ERA driver was unable to catch Hutchinson, who escaped to win by 16 seconds at 57.14mph. Bira and Dobson shared fastest lap of 73.34 mph, and behind the latter who averaged 69.69mph were Maclure (Riley), Manders (Adler), Sir A. MacRobert (MG), Ellison and Cholmondelay Tapper (who, like postwar racer Divina Galica, later represented Britain in the equally exciting sport of ski racing). The unfortunate Duke of Grafton was rushed to hospital but despite his brave protestations that he was alright, he quickly succumbed to his burns. Motor racing lost a promising driver who would have survived had he not acquired such a powerful car so soon in his career.

A financial disagreement between the race committee and the Irish Motor Racing Club led to the cancellation of the 1937 race and the Grand Prix wasn't held again until August 1938. The lapse resulted in a reduced entry but the 17 starters for the 151-mile race included such cross-channel drivers as Tony Rolt in his ERA and Peter Monkhouse with a supercharged MG Midget.

A chicane had been installed on the bend where the Duke of Grafton had crashed but the tragedy was quickly forgotten as Ernie Robb (MG) and Hal Bradley (SS100) dived furiously for the opening seven laps. There was little daylight between the pair as the stylish Robb led his more exuberant rival until the MG's engine bade a

Congratulations for 1935 winner, Donald Maclure.



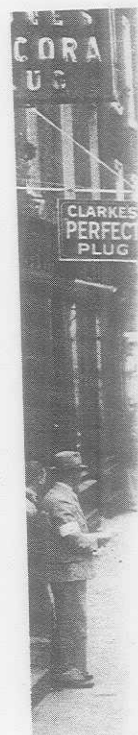
sudden farewell with a clear run.

Tony Rolt was caught the slow 68.74 mph by company for Bradley still on the inevitable wall and wreck.

Peter Monkhouse charged Midge of fastest make any in Maclure whose an early stage Thompson trouble engine trouble healthy five-year R.E. Campbell (McQ-Special) who held on Thompson Maclure's win Monkhouse.

In December Limerick race financial reasons

Limerick hosts the



sudden farewell to its innards leaving Bradley with a clear run at the limit men.

Tony Rolt and his ERA were also on course to catch the slower drivers and he set fastest lap at 68.74 mph before a broken rear axle signalled company for Robb. Despite Robb's demise, Bradley still circulated at hair-raising pace until the inevitable happened and he crashed into a wall and wrecked his pristine Jaguar.

Peter Monkhouse and J. Weir in their super-charged Midgets then squabbled for the honour of fastest man on the course but neither could make any impression on race-leader Donald Maclure whose own Midget had been ahead from an early stage. Ford Special driver Aubrey Thompson threatened the leader briefly until engine trouble intervened, leaving his rival a healthy five-minute win from fellow-Belfast driver R.E. Campbell (Morgan). Bray's Bill McQuillan (McQ-Special) was third ahead of Monkhouse who held off fellow MG driver Weir, while Thompson was credited with sixth place. Maclure's winning speed was 54.21mph and Monkhouse was fastest finisher at 58.74mph.

In December 1938 it was announced that the Limerick races were to be abandoned due to financial reasons, so the 1938 Limerick Grand Prix

passed into history as the last round-the-houses race to be held in Ireland before the war. This was sad news for overseas as well as Irish competitors and as Prince Bira had so often pointed out, English-based drivers were delighted with the opportunity to sample in Ireland the road racing opportunities which were denied to them at home. Wars and rumours of wars — this time not Irish ones — also played a role in the sudden decline of the town races and only the Phoenix Park series kept road racing alive in Ireland in 1939.

The post-war years were to see a revival in street racing which was also used to good effect by the shrewd TV-conscious moguls of Grand Prix racing, with new events at such venues as Long Beach. Pioneer motorist, artist and lyricist Percy French would have been amused to hear of the 1985 inauguration of a street race in his beloved Ballyjamesduff. The reposing Cavan town is a long remove from Long Beach but its first race winner was young James Roe from Naas, whose brother Michael scored a notable success at the 1984 Long Beach Grand Prix meeting, while on his way to become the first Irish driver to win the North American Can-Am Sportscar Championship. ■

Limerick hosts Ireland's last pre-war street race in 1938. Weir (2) leads the pack, ahead of Rolt, who set fastest lap at 68.74 mph.

