

# A Topographical Canvass

One of the last articles written by Jim Kemmy

**C**anvassing at election times is not the easiest of work. Each time around, every candidate encounters the usual crop of problems, only more so. There is hardly a family in the country that has not been touched at some time by unemployment, emigration, or some other kind of trouble or misfortune.

Every four years or so, the people have the politicians at their mercy, and they take full advantage of this situation. As a candidate walks from door to door throughout a constituency, he or she soon fills a book of complaints on a wide range of issues.

There are, of course, other occupational hazards. In the general election of November, 1982, I was bitten twice by a terrier. And to make matters worse, I lost my Dáil seat into the bargain!

Limerick East is a far-flung constituency which includes all the city and part of the county, and stretches into Co. Clare, taking in much of the rich, fertile lands of the Golden Vale, to the Co. Tipperary border. Though the cautious Co. Limerick farmers have never regarded me as God's gift to Irish politics, for my own self-respect I have to canvass as much of the constituency as possible, including the rural part.

As my supporters and I make our way through the Co. Limerick countryside, it is uphill work (in every sense of the word!) all the way. Some Irish farmers regard socialism as a political form of Aids and often react accordingly! So, to boost my morale, I always start my canvass in my native city, where I have my political base.

## People and places

But electioneering is not all complaints and headaches, and there are some benefits to be gained from the whole experience. During my campaigns I often find myself in pleasant, out-of-the-way places. I also renew acquaintances with people I haven't met for twenty or thirty years. And, depending on the time of the election, I see Limerick in a variety of moods and colours.

As a mason, I enjoy studying the variety of brick and stone buildings when I approach to knock on the front doors. The Limerick city skyline is dominated by the neo-Gothic spire of St. John's Cathedral and continues to have a fascination for me. As I make my way through the streets and avenues of the city, I like to recall the topographical references in poetry and prose by Limerick writers and others who walked these thoroughfares before me.

**Kate O'Brien**

My family lived for more than 150 years in

Garryowen, a stone's throw from Boru House, where the novelist Kate O'Brien was born in 1897. She wrote two books of reminiscences about the city and county, *My Ireland* (1962), and her last work *Presentation Parlour* (1963). In *My Ireland* she fondly retraced her childhood steps:

*So across Sarsfield Bridge, between the two Boat Clubs - and taking my time, I always like to go slowly, either way, across this bridge, for from it there is everything to see - St. Mary's, the Courthouse, lighting up above the water; prams in collision; seagulls tearing a filthy fish apart; a Boeing jet streaking across the blue sky making its own pure line of cloud.*

## John Francis O'Donnell

Another Limerick writer, John Francis O'Donnell (1837-1874), also lived near Garryowen and wrote about the place in his poetry. Any time I walk through the city market at High Street and Cornmarket Row, I am always reminded of the poet. The scenes, in the midst of which O'Donnell grew up, impressed themselves indelibly on his fertile imagination. And it is as a city child that he recalled the "things I long have longed to see" in one of his best poems, 'Limerick Town':

*There is High Street on the hillside,  
twenty shops on either side,  
Queer, old-fashioned dusky High  
Street, here so narrow there so wide,  
Whips and harness, saddles,  
signboards, hanging out in quiet pride.*

*Rolled the waggons, swore the carters,  
outside in the crowded street,  
Horses reared, and cattle stumbled,  
dogs barked high from loads of wheat,  
But inside the room was pleasant, and  
the air with thyme was sweet.*

## Frank O'Connor

Any time I look at the tower of St. Mary's Cathedral, I am forcibly reminded of Frank O'Connor. While he had something of a love/hate relationship with Limerick, I must confess that I get great enjoyment from his two travel-books, *Irish Miles* (1947) and *Leinster, Munster and Connaught* (1948). Here is his description from 'Irish Miles' of St. Mary's and the approach to the city from the Killaloe (Co. Clare) road:

*We passed Georgian mansions, orchards  
and nursery gardens, and at last we  
came in the dusk to the familiar bridge  
guarded by its grey drum towers, above it*

*the skinny old cathedral tower stood up  
against the sky, bleak and blue-grey and  
all old maidish in its curling papers of  
battlements.*

"Curling papers of battlements ..." of St. Mary's Cathedral. How apt and how typical of O'Connor's direct but memorable style!

## Brian Merriman

Brian Merriman, like his fellow-countyman, Eugene O'Curry, was one of the most scholarly Claremen ever to cross Thomond Bridge to seek employment in Limerick. He went to live in Old Clare Street, near the Dublin Road. And the shade of Frank O'Connor will be pleased to know that the Limerick Corporation recently named a new square in Old Clare Street after the poet. This honour should help to ensure that Merriman's name will live on in his adopted city.

## Michael Hogan

Often, when crossing Thomond Bridge and into "Thomondgate of social joys", I recall the lines of Michael Hogan, the Bard of Thomond, from his best known poem, 'Drunken Thady', as he charted the erratic progress of Thady towards the bridge:

*When nodding head and zig zag feet,  
He gained the centre of the street,  
And, giddy as a summer-midge,  
Went staggering towards old Thomond  
Bridge.*

Of course, I am never too sure of how successful my political pilgrimage to Thomondgate and other parts of the constituency will prove and every ballotbox tells its own story. But, as the countdown to the next polling day draws near, invariably I find myself reflecting on the words of John Francis O'Donnell in the last poem he wrote before his death at the early age of thirty-seven:

*We have no fears for coming years,  
And no repentings for the past.*

And, of course, all of us must try to keep in mind the whole purpose of the exercise. Let us hope that the election will produce better public representatives and a government capable of tackling the country's problems. Last time and this time around I will be working - and walking - in tandem with my friend and Labour Party colleague, Jan O'Sullivan.

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