

The Bells Of St. Mary's

by Finbar Crowe



The city of Limerick is fortunate in having within its confines two excellent peals of bells, and though the ring at Mount St. Alphonsus is relatively modern (have been recast in 1947) it is the older bells of St. Mary's Cathedral that are closest to the hearts of all true Limerick people. Whether you hear their mellifluous notes sweeping over the Shannon on a summer's morning or echoing through the cold streets on a winter's night, their spell is still enchanting, their rich cadence unmistakable. And you **know** you are in Limerick.

For centuries the bells have witnessed all the vicissitudes of our turbulent history, pealing forth in joy and in sorrow, for festival and funeral, bringing consolation to all with their mellow tones. At Eastertide they rang out to celebrate the risen Christ and at Christmas, in the words of Michael Hogan, the Bard of Thomond:

"The sweet-toned bells of Mary's tower
Proclaimed the Saviour's natal hour!
And many an eye with pleasure glistened,
And many an ear with rapture listened".

Like a dutiful servant, the bells have marked the march of time through the centuries. But the pleasure they bring is by no means confined to the past. Picture, if you will, a quiet Sunday morning in the Custom House Park, within a stone's throw the Abbey and Shannon rivers uniting in their surge to the sea. Look upriver, past Curragour Falls, taking in the Treaty Stone, Thomond Bridge, the castle of King John. Suddenly, as if the heavens had opened, the melodic notes of St. Mary's bells resound in the still air, their music

wafting over the echoing sky. Harmoniously blending both past and present, the peals reverberate from quay to quay, penetrating the innermost caverns of the heart of man and city. Noise and discord retreat as the bells cast their magic spell. What Limerick person, in such a setting, would not be stirred with local pride? And who would not be moved to say "This is my own, my native land"?

There are many legends concerning the bells and two, in particular, are now part of Limerick's folklore. The first is that on the eve of the Reformation thirteen silver bells, which had been donated by local princes, were hidden in the Abbey River by local Franciscan friars. As Michael Hogan related the story in verse:-

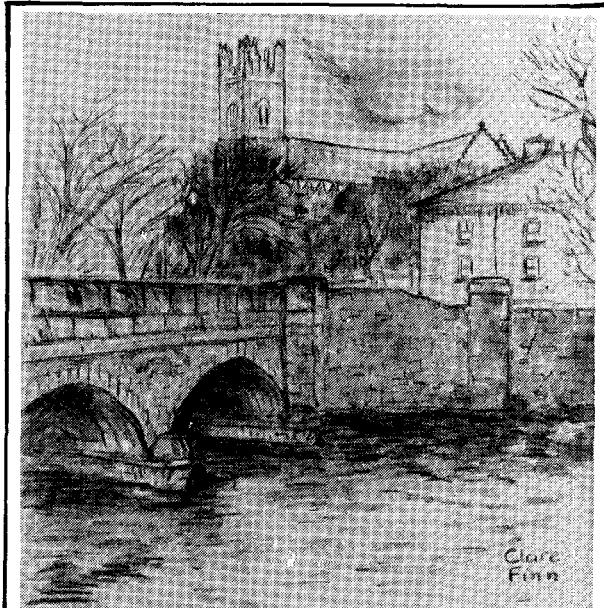
"Down to the Abbey River's shore
The Silver Bells the cowled brethren bore;
They loosened a boat from the bank's wet side
To drop the bells in the central tide".

Then, as the story goes, having rowed to a designated spot on the river, they reluctantly set about their sad task. Again, the Bard of Thomond poetically recounts the tale:

"One by one
The Bells are gone,
Like things^s of stone
To the bottom thrown".

Given that the tale is only a legend, it is not surprising that the lost bells have never been recovered.

The second legend tells of a young bell-founder from Florence who spent many years making a peal of bells. These were purchased and hung in a convent near Lake Como. The Florentine, from the profits of the sale, procured a villa near the convent from where he had the pleasure of hearing his bells. However, due to the political upheavals of that era, the convent was



Clare Finn

The cathedral tower and Matthew Bridge.

destroyed and the bells were carried off with the spoils of war. Nobody knew where they had been taken and the young Italian was distraught.

He inquired everywhere about the whereabouts of his beloved bells but in vain. One day it happened that he met a man who had travelled over the seas. The stranger told him that at Limerick in Ireland, he had heard the most wonderful peal of bells. The poor Florentine trembled and resolved to go there immediately. So he took a ship for Ireland and at last arrived at the mouth of the Shannon. He was rowed up the river and, as dusk settled, the tall tower of St. Mary's Cathedral stood out against the fading sky. Suddenly from the tower came the enchanting melody of the bells. They were indeed **his** bells, and tears of joy streamed down his face. The rowers waited for him to leave the boat but he lay still. They tried in vain to rouse him. Alas, he was dead.

In 1966 Dean Talbot received a letter from a student in Taiwan who had read the above legend in his schoolbook. He was very interested in the story and, in reply, he was sent a tape recording of the bells. So now the bells may be heard in far-off China!

It is interesting to note that the origin of the tower has led to some controversy. Begley, in his **History of the Diocese of Limerick** states: "There is no record when the tower was erected, (though) it is certain it formed no part of the original building, it is equally certain it was erected before 1500 A.D." In the old maps published by the commissioners of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I a spire is shown where the tower now stands. However, as this would appear to be completely out of character with the rest of the building it is doubtful if it ever existed.

But this conclusion still leaves us in

a quandary. Some people maintain that the tower was added to the Cathedral in the 14th century to house (as we shall see later) the first peal of bells. Others maintain that it was built with the original structure in the 12th century. Indeed Wilkinson in his **Ancient Architecture of Ireland** is of the opinion that the tower was a portion of the original palace of Donal O'Brien (who financed the building of St. Mary's). Could it be that the present tower replaced an earlier one? The consideration of that vexed question must be left for another day.

The position of the tower on a pillared archway, directly over the entrance to the Cathedral and in the middle of the facade, would have been a novel and bold idea in the 12th century. In almost all Saxon and early English churches the tower was located either to the right or left in the facade, thus leaving the building with an unsymmetrical appearance. Hence the idea of erecting two towers, one at either side, to introduce uniformity. (Where this has been done - St. Finbarr's Cathedral in Cork is a relatively modern example - it is often interesting to speculate as to which tower contains the bells).

However it would seem as if the architect of St. Mary's Cathedral contended that a tower need not rest on solid walls down to the foundations; that a well constructed arch possessed all the strength and durability of the thickest wall; and he boldly planned to place his in the centre of the facade. It is quite clear from all this that whether

or not the tower was erected with the Cathedral, it was envisaged in the plans that at some stage a tower would adorn the building.

The limestone tower, as it now stands, measures 120 feet from top to ground. The Irish stepped turrets that crown it would appear to have been added some time after its construction.

There is another interesting story concerning the tower during the sieges of 1690/91. As during Ireton's siege in 1651, the Cathedral itself came in for some heavy pounding from the besieging artillery, though it is said that Ginkle did not wish to destroy it, deeming it an ornament to the city. It served as a store in which most of the provisions of the Irish army were placed. More importantly, however, guns were directed from the high fortifications of the tower against the besieging armies. It is said in popular tradition that it was a gun fired by Burke, an expert artillerist, from the tower that almost killed William of Orange outside his tent in Singland in 1690.

The first reference to the Cathedral bells dates from the time of John Budston (or Buston), who was Bailiff of Limerick in 1401. He was a wealthy and prominent citizen and an ancestor of the famous Arthur family. A liberal benefactor of St. Mary's he financed the building of the chapel of St. James and St. Mary Magdalene, which now contains the original altar-stone of the Cathedral. (This slab is reputed to be one of the longest altar-stones in Ireland or Britain). Budston's daughter, Margaret, married Peter Arthur, and

their son left the following record:

"John Budston, whose bells sound in the shrine of the Virgin, made a gift to the church of 4 brass bells".

Dr. Arthur, in his manuscript also commemorates this gift with the following verse:

"Without morality all faith is vain
John Buston teaches in this warning strain,
Who to the Church those powerful bells has given,
Do thou, departing, with him rest in heaven".

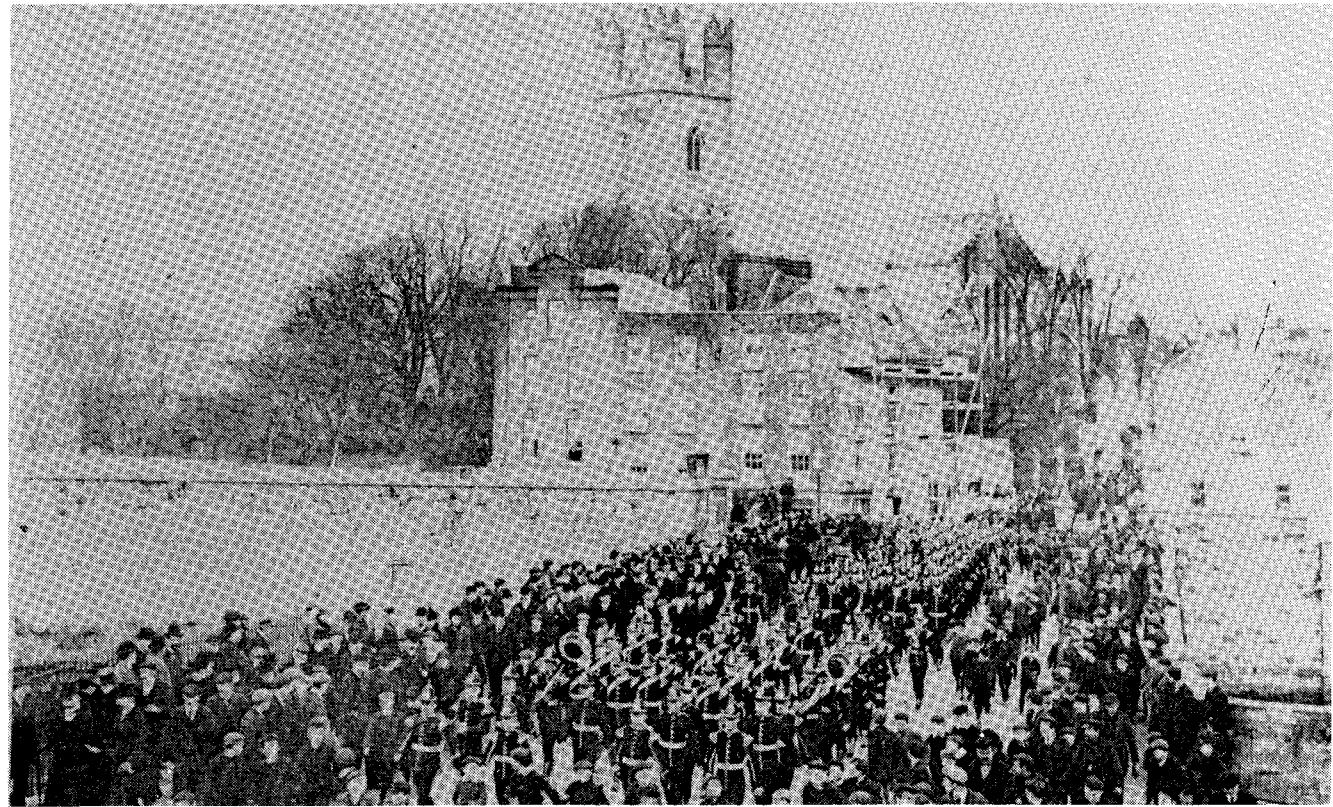
Thus it is contended by some that the tower was built around this period to house Budston's bells. It is doubtful if the bells were cast from brass, as this metal was rarely used for bell-casting. They were probably made of bronze.

The next reference to the bells in the Cathedral records is in the 17th century when William Yorke presented six bells to St. Mary's. Yorke, who was of Dutch origin, also financed the building of the Exchange in Nicholas Street. He was an alderman and became mayor of the city in 1673, 1674 and again in 1678, dying in office in April 1679. He was buried in the Cathedral and a memorial plaque on one of the pillars bears the following inscription:

"This monument was erected by William Yorke, to the memory of his deceased Father, Alderman William Yorke, who lies here interred; was thrice mayor, gave above four hundred pounds for building the Exchange and freely bestowed it on the Corporation; contributed to the bells and chimes, which were cast



The cathedral entrance, as drawn by James O'Halloran.



A military band crossing Matthew Bridge, with the Cathedral in the background c.1890.

and set up in his Mayoraltyes; was charitable to the poore, constant to his friend; died in the true Christian faith the last year of his Mayoralty April 1. 1679. Aetatis suae 42. leaving William, Roger, and Jane by Anna, the daughter of Henry Hart Esq."

Yorke's bells were cast on site by the noted bell-founders, William and Roger Perdue, who came from Gloucestershire. (They also cast bells for St. Patrick's and Christ Church cathedrals in Dublin, St. Werburgh's Church, Dublin, St. Canice's Cathedral, Kilkenny, and St. David's Church, Naas). It is probable that Budston's bells were used in the casting of York's peal. Regrettably, William Perdue died while engaged in this work and was buried in the grounds of St. Mary's Cathedral. During his travels Dineley noted the following punning inscription to his memory when he visited the Cathedral in 1680:

"Here a bell-founder honest and true
Until the Resurrection lies Perdue".

Unfortunately this epitaph has now been worn away by time and clime.

The initials of William and Roger Perdue were inscribed on the third bell (until 1923, when it was recast) with these words in Latin:

"Vivat Rex et Floreat Grex Anno
Domini 1673 W.P. R.P.".

Yorke's peal of six bells was first rung in March 1674 on the occasion of the proclamation of peace between the English and Dutch (England had been in an alliance with Louis XIV of France against the Dutch, under William of

Orange). News of this treaty was received with great jubilation. The mayor and the members of the Corporation rode through the streets and the militia marched under arms. Great rejoicings followed in the city.

In 1703 two more bells were added to Yorke's peal by Tobias and Edward Covey, who are reputed to have been descendants of the Perdues. It is on record that the eight bells rang out in 1712 to welcome James, Duke of Ormonde, and Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, to Limerick.

Over the years the eight bells gave wonderful service similar to that inscribed on another old church bell:

"I ring to sermon with a lusty boome
That all may come and none may stay
at home".

In the late 19th century, however, the bells and frame fell into a state of disrepair. During this period the bells, which could not be swung, were sounded by means of an antiquated chiming apparatus, clappers being pulled against the sides of the motionless bells. As a result, the city was deprived of the full tone of the bells for up to 30 years.

However, a public subscription was initiated, and with the enthusiastic backing of the **Limerick Chronicle**, sufficient funds were collected to restore the bells. After their enforced silence the famous bells pealed out once more on December 22nd, 1906, when a band of ringers from Mount St. Alphonsus were invited to visit the tower. They returned on Christmas Eve

to ring the bells at midnight. Meanwhile Joseph H. Wright, editor of the **Limerick Chronicle**, had instructed a new band of ringers at St. Mary's and this young and enthusiastic team pealed the bells on Christmas morning, thus resuming the fine tradition of bellringing in the Cathedral.

A formal ceremony took place after a special service on St. Stephen's Day when an invited band from St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, led by the renowned campanologist, Gabriel Lindoff, rang a special peal of 1,906 changes for the occasion. In spite of the fact that a severe blizzard reigned outside the tower, a considerable number of citizens congregated near the Cathedral to hear once more the old, familiar sound.

In the following years additional work was deemed necessary, from time to time, to maintain the bells and frame. The fourth bell, which had become defective, was replaced in 1907 by a new bell, cast by John Taylor and Co., Loughborough, England, at the expense of Everard Hewson, of Castlehewson, Askeaton, Co. Limerick. Mr. Hewson, who loved the bells and generously contributed to their upkeep, also paid for the recasting of the eighth bell (tenor) in 1930. The name of William Yorke, the original donor, was preserved on this bell after recasting. The third bell (as already mentioned) was recast in 1923, again by Messrs. John Taylor and Co., at the expense of Sir Alec Shaw.

During the years 1937/38 very ex-

tensive renovations were carried out in the belfry. The oak beams which supported the bell frames, having deteriorated, were replaced by two massive steel girders which are deeply embedded in the tower walls. The first, second and seventh bells were recast, again with generous financial aid from Everard Hewson, and new bearings and gudgeons were fitted to all the bells. A modern chiming apparatus was also installed and this can be manipulated by one person when a team of ringers is not available.

The building portion of all this work was undertaken by the Thomond Building and Joinery Works, Limerick, while all the work pertaining to the bells was carried out by Messrs. Taylor and Co.

The fifth and sixth bells, which were cast by T. Meares of London in 1829, are now the oldest bells in the tower.

The bellringers at the Cathedral, besides performing their weekly duties in the tower, have also brought great honour to Limerick. Over the years they have been one of the leading bands of ringers in the country, and their dedication and expertise has been justly rewarded in bellringing competitions. They have been successful on ten occasions in the Southern District Cham-

pionships and have carried off the All-Ireland Bellringing Trophy on six occasions, a record surpassed only by their colleagues at Mount St. Alphonsus. In the years 1949, 1950 and 1951 they won three All-Irelands in a row, an outstanding achievement in Irish bellringing.

Though many ringers have contributed to this magnificent record (and it would be outside the scope of this article to name them all) it is a feature of St. Mary's Society of Bellringers that certain families have been traditionally associated with the tower. The Binghamhs, Brislanes, Coxes, Fogertys, Fosters, Galbraiths, Howeses, Marsdens, McCormacks, Ellises (and others) have in the past, as in the present, given years of devoted service to the bells. George Bingham, the doyen of Limerick bellringers, was for 53 years a dedicated member of the tower before retiring from active ringing in 1972. Indeed George can recall attending practice nights in the 1920s when he and his fellow ringers had to sleep in the belfry, being unable to return home because of the curfew. One can only marvel at that degree of devotion! This wonderful tradition of bellringing is now carried on by his grandson, John Boyle.

The present Captain of St. Mary's bellringers is Michael Pomeroy, who hails from Somerset. He has vast experience in "method ringing" ("Plain Bob", "Grandsire", "Stedman", etc.) in various towers in his native England, and has been a major asset to the bellringing fraternity in Limerick. Unobtrusively assisted by his vice-captain, Roy McCormack, he has worked tirelessly to advance the cause of "method ringing" (as opposed to "call changes", the traditional mode in Limerick), and has met with considerable success in his endeavours.

The bells of St. Mary's have made an enormous contribution to the life of Limerick. Not only in their melodic pealing have they brought joy and comfort, but they have bestowed on the citizens of Limerick a sense of pride and identity that has enriched their lives. Long may they continue to do so! And long may it be our good fortune in Limerick to hear, as John Betjeman so eloquently put it

"A multiplicity of bells,
A changing cadence rich and deep
Swung from those pinnacles on high
To fill the trees and flood the sky
And rock the sailing clouds to sleep".



A group of bell-ringers in the early 1950s.