

we say of him in Ireland, where the claims of God and nature upon his time and zeal are so numerous and so urgent? I do not venture to affirm that the diminished influence of the priesthood in Ireland is an evidence of the increased progress of education; but I do say that henceforward the one will be found to go on in an exact ratio with the other.

'As for the Protestant clergymen, on the other hand, they are in general *gentlemen*. They do not seek association with the ragged and filthy inmates of the hut. They mind their farms; exchange dinners with their respectable neighbours; lead regular lives; and die with the reputation of having performed worthily the duties of Christian priests. The presence of such men, with their families, is doubtless a great advantage to the country. They set a good moral and farming example, and spend a decent income in the district.

'The learning of the priests, I have hinted, is purely theological; and so are their manners. The habits of a secluded student engrafted on the rudeness of a clown, are not very attractive; and perhaps this is the true reason why the priests mingle but little in good society, even of their own religious persuasion. However this may be, their learning itself, independently of other proof, is pleasantly illustrated by an anecdote related of the priory of Mungret, within the liberties of Limerick.

'A deputation, it seems was sent from the College of Cashel, to try the skill of the Mungret scholars in the dead languages; and the monks were thrown into some alarm lest anything might happen to injure the reputation they had so long enjoyed. After consulting together, they dressed some of their most accomplished pupils like peasant girls, and sending them out, one by one, desired them to reply in Latin to any question that might be put to them. One of them speedily fell in with the Cashel professors, who, on asking the distance to Mungret, were startled by receiving the reply in a dead language. This happened again, and again, and again; and at length the holy fathers determined not to venture upon any examination of professors in a district where even the peasant girls spoke Latin, and turning hastily round, made their way back to Cashel.

'I have talked of the trade, the wealth, the beauty of Limerick – in fact, of the outside; and this is all which is likely to catch the eye of the cursory visitor, and all which he cares to examine. We have seen that there are numerous individuals enjoying an income of nearly a thousand pounds a year; and that there is abundance of genteel equipages, good houses and handsome women. Like the *Diable Bioteux*, we have unreefed the city of the busy, the gay, and the fair; and, like him, have left closely covered up the abodes of hunger and destitution. Limerick however, has not, like other great towns, merely the mixture of poverty and wealth found in all the crowded haunts of mankind.

Limerick, in a word, is not a town of Europe, or Asia, or Africa, or America: it is an Irish town.

'If I had contented myself with traversing Newtown, and the principal thoroughfares of Englishtown, and Irishtown, I should have pursued my journey with favourable impressions of the condition and character of the inhabitants. Then I should have seen only a fair intermixture (for an Irish town) of rags with embroidery, of hovels with houses, of concave and convex cheeks. Then I should have been as much amused as pained – may God forgive me for the hardness of heart! – by the absurd devices occasionally detected for appearing to cover the body with raiment – by the transformation of women into men, and men into women, and children into either.

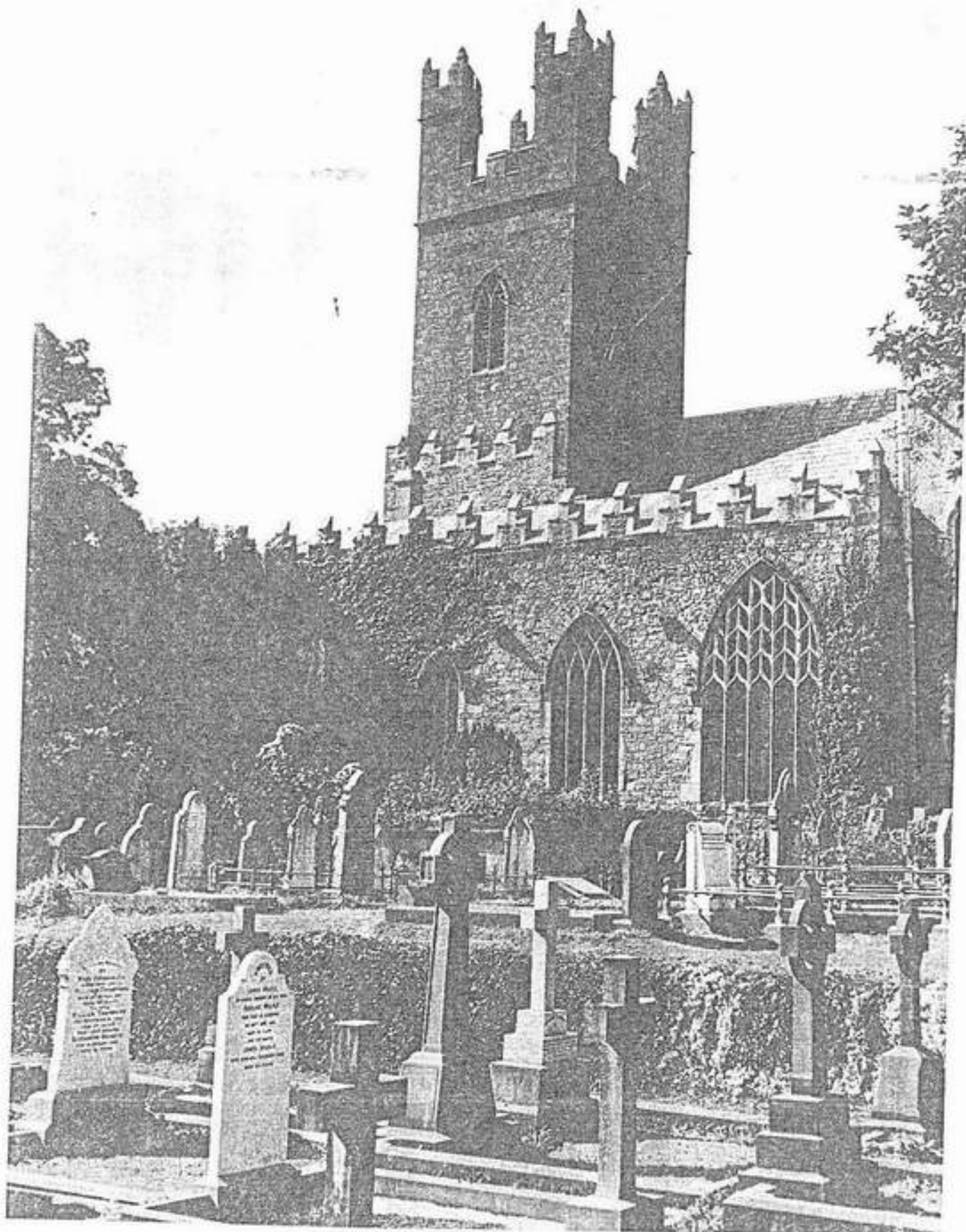
'But, unhappily, I would needs calculate that the crowds I saw could be only specimens of a few thousands of the inhabitants; and I would needs diverge from the great thoroughfares of business and pleasure, to plunge into the lanes, and alleys and courts, for the purpose of looking at the remaining classes.'

If Mr Ritchie avoided the lanes and alleys, present day visitors would be well advised to explore them for therein dwell people who, although urbanised, still treasure tales of the past. They are generous in passing on their precious lore, some of which is contained in imposing volumes as well as in humble heads.

### *St Mary's Bells*

*Halls' Ireland* or, to be precise, *Ireland – its Scenery, Character, &c.* by Mr & Mrs S. C. Hall is one of those beautifully bound, gold-edged books laden with tissue illustrations that bibliolaters love to caress. It contains a delightful footnote elaborating on its reference to St Mary's Cathedral, built on the site of the palace of O'Brien, King of Thomond, and founded by Donal Mór O'Brien after the 1176 fire of Limerick. The Halls said the edifice was the only place from which a good view of the city could be seen and their story ends with a picture of that very panorama:

'There is a curious and interesting tradition connected with the bells of Limerick cathedral. The story is prettily told, and will bear repetition. They were, it is said, brought originally from Italy, where they were manufactured by a young native, who grew justly proud of the successful results of years of anxious toil expended in their production. They were subsequently purchased by the prior of a neighbouring convent; and with the profits of this sale the young Italian procured a little villa, where he had the pleasure of hearing the tolling of his bells from the convent cliff, and of growing old in the bosom of domestic happiness. This, however, was not to continue. In some of those



St Mary's Cathedral

broils, whether civil or foreign, which are the undying worm in the peace of a fallen land, the good Italian was a sufferer amongst many. He lost his all; and, after the passing of the storm, found himself preserved alone amid the wreck of fortune, friends, family and home. The convent in which the bells, the *chiefs-d'oeuvre* of his skill, were hung, was razed to the earth, and the bells were carried away to another land. The unfortunate owner, haunted by his memories, and deserted by his hopes, became a wanderer over Europe. His hair grew grey, and his heart withered, before he again found a home and a friend. In this desolation of spirit, he formed the resolution of seeking the place to which the treasures of his memory had been finally borne. He sailed for Ireland, proceeded up the Shannon; the vessel anchored in the pool near Limerick, and he hired a small boat for the purpose of landing. The city was now before him; and he beheld St Mary's steeple, lifting its turreted head above the smoke and mist of the old town. He sat in the stern, and looked fondly towards it. It was an evening so calm and beautiful as to remind him of his own native haven in the sweetest time of the year – the death of the spring.

'The broad stream appeared like one smooth mirror, and the little vessel glided through it. On a sudden, amid the general stillness, the bells tolled from the cathedral; the rowers rested on their oars, and the vessel went forward with the impulse it had received. The aged Italian looked towards the city, crossed arms on his breast, and lay back in his seat; home, happiness, early recollections, friends, family – all were in the sound, and went with it to his heart. When the rowers looked round, they beheld him with his face still turned towards the cathedral; but his eyes were closed, and when they landed they found him dead!'

A little of the Bard of Thomond's poem, *The Silver Bells* must be quoted here. It concerns another legend of St Mary's Bells, when friars hid them from marauding 'reformers', but its introductory lines serve for either story:

The bright-red even' is purpling o'er  
The golden summits of Cappantimore,  
And the dark-blue Shannon is rolling down  
By the war-cleft ramparts of Limerick town.  
There roams no zephyr on bank or shore –  
The hills are hazed and the plains are hoar;  
And the moss-clad bridge with its rocky chain  
Of hurl-built arches, lay o'er the tide,  
And its brown shadow rusted the silver plain  
Of the sweeping current from side to side;  
While the sunset cloudlets seem'd to diffuse,

In the river's crystal, their diamond hues,  
 As if spirits were lining its bed below,  
 With the glistening dyes of the showery bow.  
 On bank and mead, town, turret and wood,  
 A calm, like the charm of dreamland, dwells,  
 And nothing is heard but the hoarse-toned flood,  
 And the golden chime of St Mary's bells.

Sarsfield

Sarsfield went out, the Dutch to rout,  
 And to take and break their cannon;  
 To Mass went he at half-past-three  
 And at four he crossed the Shannon.

Aubrey de Vere was not the only poet who made Patrick Sarsfield his subject. The warrior immortalised for his action against King William's siege train at Ballyneety has been a recurring source of pride for generations of authors and historians.

Fine English was once a status-symbol in rural Ireland. That was when Gaelic lived on as the language of the common folk even as it was considered a sign of having received an education if a word or two of the King's English dropped from tea-stained lips. Foolish young men learned phrases at the behest of sorely pressed matchmakers and there was little to beat a good prognostication of proving pluvial or the like in bidding for a fair fortune if



Patrick Sarsfield

not a fair figure. This trait lingered in men of the soil long after English – through great misfortune and greater carelessness – became the spoken language. Sons of gombeen men still used fine words to impress and so it came to pass that a young student of the forties entered a diocesan seminary and was asked to write an essay or 'composition'. The subject was Patrick Sarsfield.

Now this boy had broken everything on his father's farm except the crowbar and he bent that. Realising he was fit only for the priesthood, therefore, the father had instilled in the lad the importance of the 'turn of phrase'. A great *glauum* reached for an N-pen. He would show some of these smart townie class-mates with scholarships and red boots a thing or two! He would impress the professor of English. Right! Patrick Sarsfield, paragraph one: 'The sun was slowly sinking in a crimson fresnel as the siege train shunted into Ballyneety. . .'

Commentators on the Shannon's lore and loveliness often finish their discourse at Limerick, forgetting that the river's fine estuary extends, arguably, to a line between Loop Head and Kerry Head. Goodly folk there are in Kerry and south Clare who rightly consider themselves claimants to some of Shannon's fame. Heading hence, the Bard of Thomond again provides fitting verse:

. . . Farewell! to thy old hospitable halls,  
 And veteran ramparts now no longer ours!  
 Farewell to thy invulnerable walls –  
 Thy festive palaces and lordly towers!  
 Farewell! to thy all-beauteous, bright-eyed maids,  
 Whose deeds shall long be honour'd and admired –  
 The stranger now may revel in thy shades,  
 Where Freedom, in her last retreat, expired!

Far o'er the heavings of the angry deep,  
 I'll meet thy foes upon another shore!  
 My sword shall yet a vengeful harvest reap,  
 For Sarsfield's last brave battle is not o'er!  
 Limerick! one grateful boon from thee I claim –  
 Whatever fate holds bright or dark for me –  
 That thou wilt cherish faithful Sarsfield's name,  
 And love his memory as he loved thee!

The only angry deep the traveller crosses is the Feale, the only foe is time, which denies a longer visit.