

BILLY CARR'S GARDEN

by Jim Kemmy

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Limerick had a number of notable gardens. Garryowen ("Owen's Garden") was the most famous of these attractions, but a few lesser known gardens also had their days of glory.

The name of Billy Carr has survived in Limerick history because of the house in which he lived and the garden adjoining it. Like Garryowen, Billy Carr's garden was celebrated in song and in story, and was situated near the present Athlunkard Street and Island Road junction.

Billy Carr was, apparently, a pleasant and likeable fellow. Maurice Lenihan in his *History of Limerick* provides this information:

The "garden" of Mr. William Carr was famous at this period for its beauty and was cultivated in the first style by an experienced gardener. Mr. Carr had three sisters who generally walked each day in the garden dressed in white in the fashion of the time, with large gold watches displayed. Mr. Francis Wheeler, the father of the present Lady Lytton Bulwer, composed a song on the Garden, which became very popular, but which appears to be now almost entirely forgotten. The following is a copy of it:

BILLY CARR'S GARDEN IN 1809

To the tune of Murtoogh Delaney.

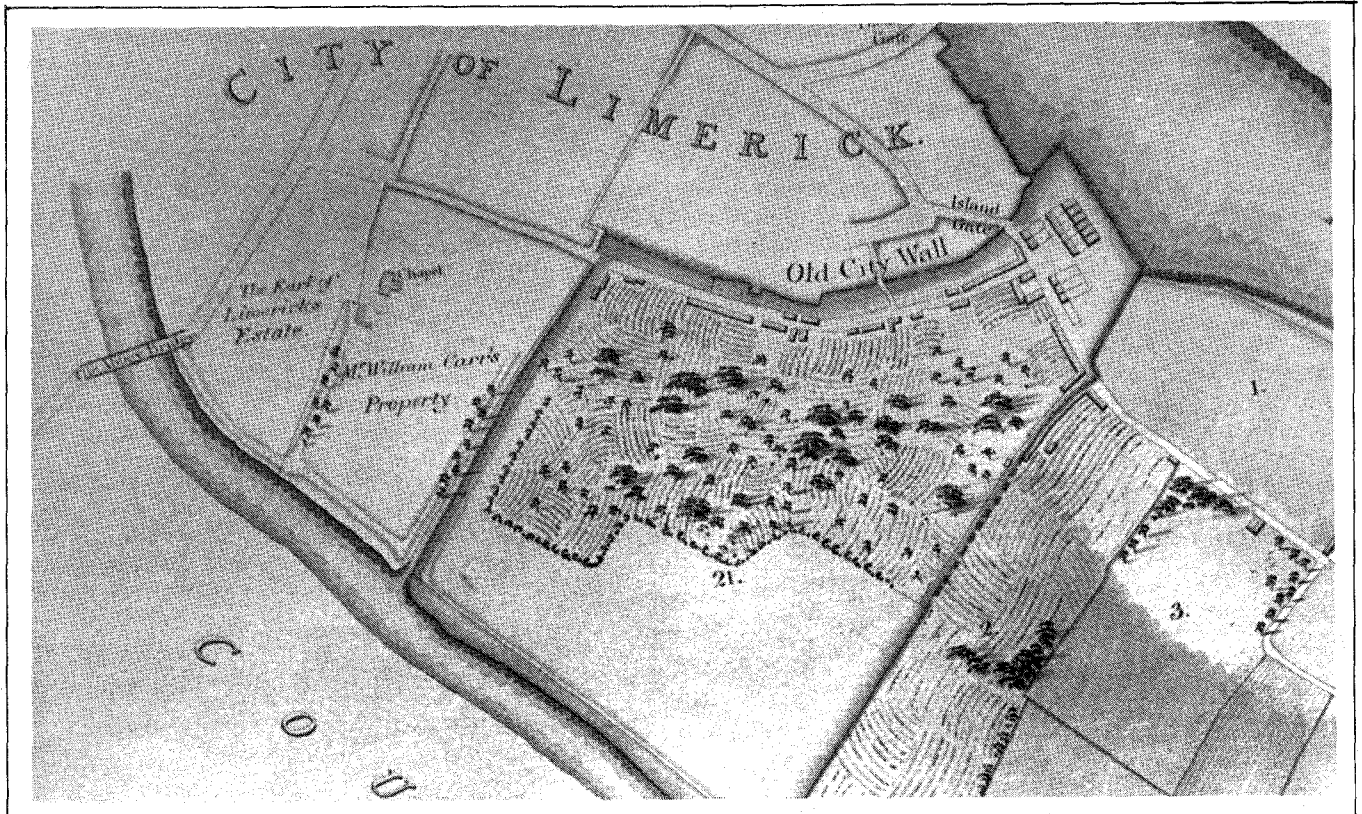
You may travel the nation all over,
From Dublin to sweet Mullingar,
And a garden you will not discover
Like the garden of sweet Billy Carr,
'Tis there that the tall trees were planted
In the days of the old Tommy Parr;

And the soft winding Shannon is flowing
Round the garden of sweet Billy Carr.

'Tis there the big praties are growing,
Enough to supply all Dunbar,
Where the soft winding Shannon is flowing,
Round the gardens of sweet Billy Carr;
His sisters like sweet pretty posies,
More beauteous than roses by far,
They bloom like carnations and roses
In the gardens of sweet Billy Carr
O! may they be happily married,
To a mayor, and a lawyer, and a tar,
How blest they will be when they're wed,
With the sisters of sweet Billy Carr!

Now if you have a mind to live frisky,
And trouble and grief would you mar —
I'd advise you to go and drink whisky,
Along with the sweet Billy Carr!
In a room, Sir, he keeps a big bottle,
Without either crack, flaw or star,
Which is often applied to the throttle,
Of that thirsty gay soul Billy Carr.

Not much more is known about Billy Carr, his three sisters, and their garden. But the recent discovery of a map and survey of the lands of King's Island adjoining the Walls of Limerick, made in June 1825 by Joseph James Byrne of 39, Stephen's Green, Dublin, by order of the Commissioners of Crown Lands in Ireland, shows the exact location of the garden (Ferrars's map of 1786 lists



The 1820 map of King's Island, drawn by James Byrne.

A Child's Parish Christmas

The road to Bethlehem
Lay along the dark ridge of Park
In the silent countryside
Beyond the Abbey river...
Images after sunset
Of a woman laden donkey
Led by a bearded man
Along unfamiliar paths
In cold moonlight.
History was a living thing,
And every Christmas was always
The first happening in our
Ancient narrow streets.
To celebrate Christ's birth
Each year in the candle-lit chapel
At the incense-charged midnight mass.
The side altar crib
Was the true stable,
With straw-strewn steps
Leading to real figures
In the deep red glow
Of a St. Mary's nativity.
In the adult world

Of late night and dark streets
The youthful joy of admission
To their grown-up preserve
Was secondary to the sight
Of shepherds in passage
Over the Clare Hills,
And star-led Kings
Coming from the east
Beyond Keeper.
Later, when the window candle
Was extinguished
And its tallow smell
Mingled with the festive aromas
Of special preparations,
I listened to fading footsteps
Along the street outside,
While father played Santa
For younger children
Before a silent world
And 3 a.m. bed called,
A Parish Christmas had begun again.

DONAL O MURCHU

the same area as "Davis's Garden").

In a note on his 1825 map Joseph James Byrne wrote:
... the entire foregoing land and houses was shown me
in a casual manner by Mr. William Carr whose
property immediately adjoins it on the south, as be-
ing the Kings Island — which agrees fully with the
description furnished me; being the King's Island
next adjoining the City Walls of Limerick on the
North East, bounded by the said walls and the River
Shannon.

Thus, sixteen years after Francis Waller had written
the song in his honour, Billy Carr was still walking his
garden. But no clues are given about the destiny of his
three beautiful sisters, and we will never know whether
they were at this stage 'happily married to a mayor, and
a lawyer and tar'. Nor will we ever know if Billy invited
the Dublin cartographer into his roomy stone house to
partake of some whiskey from his big flawless bottle.

The old Limerick name of Carr features prominently in
the history of the city. In the nineteenth century Carr's
Livery Stables in Athlunkard Street are frequently listed
in the record books of the Limerick Night Watch. Wan-
dering animals and fowl were rounded up and impounded
at the stables. It seems certain that these impressive
stone-built stables were originally used by Billy Carr for
his own horses. Later the building and yard, passed into
the hands of the old Limerick family of sandmen — the
Shanahans — who continued to use the premises until
the 1940s.

But though his name, his garden and his sisters are now
forgotten, one part of Billy Carr's property has endured.
Before Athlunkard Street was built in 1824, a solitary
house stood on that section of King's Island, just outside
the city walls. This house (now almost hidden beside the
present St. Mary's Catholic Church) was built about 1720
and is one of the oldest inhabited houses in Limerick. The
building has served as the home of successive parish
priests of St. Mary's right up to the present day. This
magnificent old house was the residence of Sweet Billy
Carr, and it was here that he drank his whiskey and sur-



Billy Carr's house.

veyed the big praties, the tall trees and his three lovely
sisters, as they gently perambulated their King's Island
garden.

Now if you have a mind to live frisky
And trouble and grief would you mar—
I'd advise you to go and drink whisky,
Along with the sweet Billy Carr!