

MEMORIES OF

BURTON'S BILLIARD SALOON

Burton's Billiard Saloon was for many a Limerick man a house of refuge in the 'forties and early 'fifties. Every morning of the week men stood in wait for "Baw" Sullivan, the caretaker, to arrive. The long, mirrored, mosaic corridor, where men would have a final glance at their quiffs before going up to the labour exchange to sign on and face genial Sam Higgins, or the legendary "Walk-aisy" Hickey. Baw would arrive as Cannock's Clock struck mid-day, jangling his large bunch of keys, a Woodbine stuck between his porter-stained lips.

Baw's first task was to light the pot-bellied stove, which lay concealed behind the small office where a list of undesirable was kept. On the outside wall of the office hung billiard cues of the more affluent players. The fire lit, covers neatly rolled up and removed from the tables, Baw would open the large windows looking on to O'Connell Street and straighten the 'No Spitting on the Floor' notices which were placed on the walls at various intervals. The idle elite, chaired by "The Chief" Frawley, would sit around the stove and wait for Micky Ryan, the owner of Burton's, to arrive. The chat would cover a wide area - soccer, horse racing, dogs... A hush would fall on us, all bad language would cease, a tradition we all respected when Mickey's short steps could be heard on the granite stairway. Hands deep in his waistcoat pockets, he looked more like a Harley Street consultant than a saloon keeper.

He would scan the tables in cold silence, fingering his gold watch and chain, a diamond pin in the lapel of his short coat. - a diamond pin he got from a black man who had fallen on hard times when Mickey was manager of a theatre in Durban. Mickey would take off his top coat and place it on the coat hook no one else dared use and then spread the daily paper on the long table, the only piece of furniture in the hall. The paper

by Joe Malone

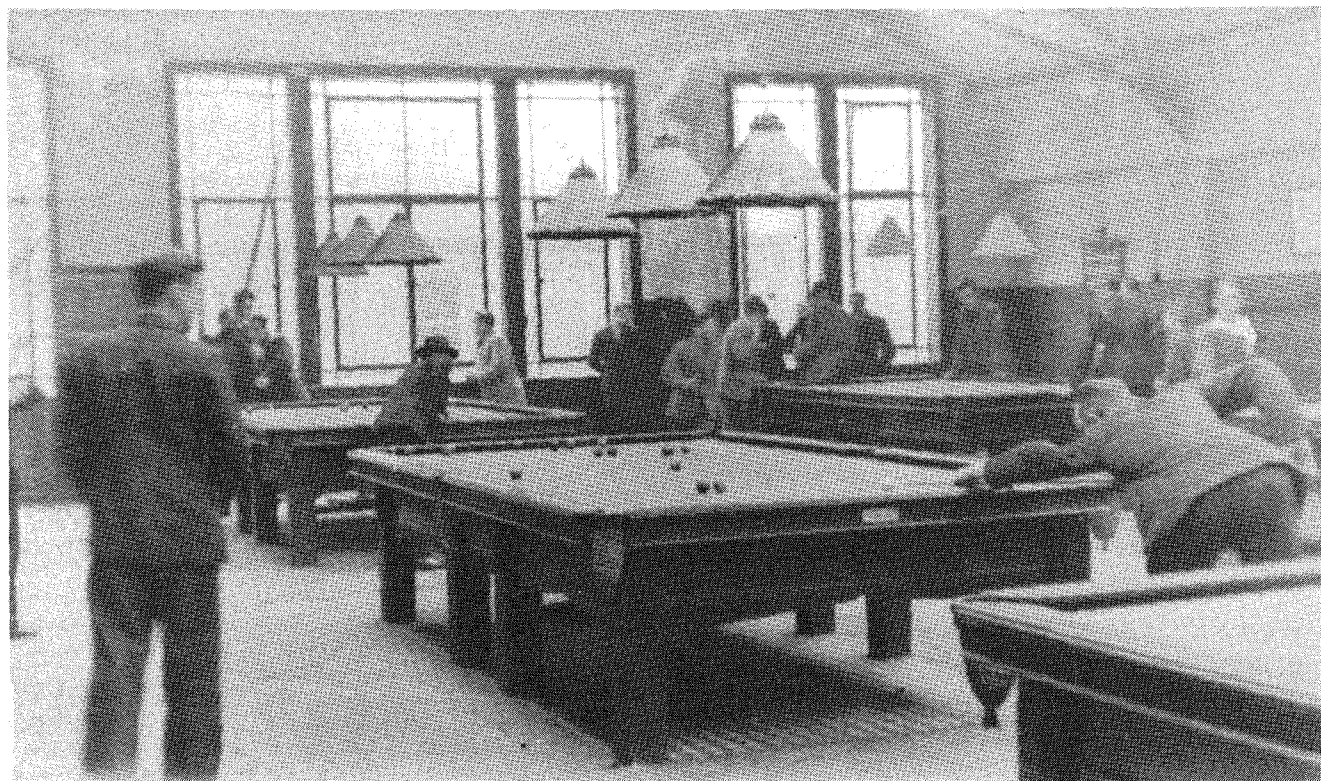
would be studied like a Spanish sea captain charting a dangerous ocean journey. Horses chosen and down on paper, "The Chief" would trot off on a mission of trust, like a courier in charge of secret documents, to a young bookie. "The Chief" knew every race course from Santa Anita to Greenpark.

One cold November day Mickey pulled a forum up the fire. This move came as a surprise, as he rarely sat at the fire. This morning, however, he was in a most friendly mood. He believed in a man keeping his own station, but this day he spoke freely. He told us the history of Burton's. He began by relating how he became the manager of 'The Sovereign', which was its name before Mickey bought it from Dan Walsh, of Cork, in 1933. He renamed it the Thomond Billiard Saloon.

He surprised us when he mentioned a stay in South Africa as a theatre manager in Durban. He went on to tell us about a bookie who operated most of the time from a pub frequented in the past by Black and Tans - it was the only pub in town which had a full size snooker table.

Mickey was a sober man in many ways and had the respect of all, and liked to talk of his allegiance to the Church; his father fought in the Papal Army against Garibaldi.

Burton's had its share of colourful characters. But it was not the Sunday morning Pool sharks that gave Burton's its unique character. The newsboys, bus conductors from the depot in Sarsfield Street, messenger boys and, of course, the two most famous characters, Mickey (Corky) Ryan and Paddy O'Brien, all added to the daily life and variety of the place.



Burton's Billiard Saloon c. 1946.

Once a rumour spread about the city of a big snooker game between Mickey and Paddy. Paddy was going to Leopardstown Military Hospital to get fitted with a new cork leg, to replace the leg lost in Flanders. This epic challenge was to be a farewell game for Paddy. Word travelled by mouth from newsvendors to the messenger boys, shouting across the streets: "Paddy and Corky are on tonight". As the day wore on, news of the game was treated with more enthusiasm than the ending of the war or even de Valera's reply to Churchill.

The stakes were high: Paddy's pension book against Corky's Post Office book. The amount in each book was never revealed. Paddy arrived on his own, after having a few "scoops" at Tiger O'Brien's. He didn't have as many supporters as Corky. Paddy placed his walking cane on the score board, wiped the four strands of hair across the crown of his head, took out his false teeth and rolled them in his cap. Then a sudden burst of song could be heard from O'Connell Street: Corky had arrived on a jarvey car, swinging a bunch of bananas. Corky plucked the bananas and doled them out. We had never seen live bananas before except in Tarzan and Apeman films.

As the balls were being set up, Johnny the jarvey came up the stairs, waving his whip like the lion tamer in John Duffy's Circus, and looking for his unpaid fare. Johnny calmed down and took his place. After some meetings from the two opposing camps, a marker and referee were appointed. Wally, himself a top class player, was appointed referee. A young man named Crowe, stepped forward and offered his services as marker. "Well, he has an honest face anyhow", said one of the neutral spectators. Mickey Ryan took no part in the debate. A week previously Mickey had caught Crowe by the hasp of his trousers as he tried to make a bolt for the stairs, after being hammered in a "rubber" by a wily cinema owner. Crowe thought he had a pigeon, but he spent the week washing the granite stairs, and cleaning windows to repay the 28s 6d, a month's wages at that time. Crowe was serving his time as a draper's assistant.

A half-crown was tossed high in the air. The coin rolled along the balkline; it was watched hawk-eyed by the assembled camp followers. "Harps it is", said Wally. Corky won the toss, walked over to the cue-rack, picked up a cue, cradled it in his arms, ran his fingers along the tip of the cue, just like D'Artagnan before the seconds called for ready. Paddy followed suit, awkwardly dragging his creaking cork leg behind him. "Paddy might be well oiled, but his mock leg isn't", one young lad muttered under his breath.

The games went on for hours, with a constant procession to the lavatory. At three games each, just before the seventh and final game, a row broke out among some unruly spectators who were removed and shown the door very quickly. All eyes were on table number six. Games being played on the other tables were left unfinished. The game went off very smoothly, red for red, colour for colour. All on the seventh and final game. Newspaper boys stood on their unsold papers to get a better view of the table.

The only sound was the two one-arm bandits being played by two disinterested Scotsmen named Mellon and Strain, who had played soccer for Limerick for the first time on the previous Sunday. The owner of the machines, who was standing among the spectators, stormed over to the bewildered Scots and turned the machines into the wall.

The black ball rested dead on its own spot, the cue ball in the middle of the table. A rest period was called for; Woodbines were passed around freely; comments were in abundance from the Woodbine wags. Paddy walked around the table singing to himself, "Baldy Bill the Sailor". Corky, at the other end, chanted American Pool hall sayings: "You little Daisy, give the man a coconut".

"The Chief", who was the promoter, called for order, bawled "Ballyhaunis", which was his substitute for a swear word.

As Corky bent over the table, his cue well chalked, the whites of his eyes matched the cue ball in colour. Suddenly the lights flashed off, and an almighty roar was heard overhead. All eyes turned to the ceiling, which was mostly glass. Some ran to the big window, "It's an aeroplane", said young Crowe, as he fled in terror, knocking the pot of glue used for cue tipping. Baw

gave a scream of deep distress. "I knew the war wasn't over..." News travelled all over Limerick. "The war is here!"

The rival camps adjourned to Tiger O'Brien's and replayed the match over pints of porter - a draw was declared.

Tiger breathed a sigh of relief. He never stopped complaining about the noise created by the Burton boys; he said they gave him bad dreams.

The snooker game was soon forgotten, as the plane became the centre of conversation. The engines could be heard missing a beat every now and then.

Meanwhile, in other parts of the city strange things were happening. A man was seen lighting matches on top of Rank's Silo; people were waving at the pilot and trying to point the pilot in the direction of Rineanna.

"It's gone up to Singland", the crowd at William Street corner shouted. Thousands of eyes turned skywards. An old man waved one fist with vengeance at the plane and held tightly on to his scapular with his other fist. "It's the prophesy of St. Malachy come true - an arial battle over Singland will take place before the End of the World".

As the green dome of the Good Shepherd Convent came into view, the pilot must have thought he was in London and passing over St. Paul's. The plane flew over the Long Can and "Dan the Devil" was aroused from his open-air slumber at the "Hot Corner". Dan must have thought it was the Day of Judgement as, surrounded by vapours, he lifted his head a few inches and heard the celestial chant of the nuns behind him. "Bad cess to them nightmares", said Dan, as he coiled his legs back under him and went back to sleep.

Eventually the plane crash-landed into the muck of Cleve's Bank. The pilot and the navigator climbed out of the plane unhurt and began to walk along the bank towards the city. They were met by a civic guard pushing his bike, a carbide lamp held aloft. The airmen thought the guard was a Welsh coal miner. The plane was stripped clean in a matter of hours. The Corcane scavengers left no evidence of aeronautic life inside. Nothing remained but the grey, empty shell, looking like a giant heron stranded in the middle of the swamp.

After the commotion of the crash life returned to normal at Burton's. The saloon was the last meeting place for lonesome Limerick men about to return to England after holidays in their native city. They told tall tales about their encounters with landladies, about the cheaper beer to be had in "Blighty" about the bigger Woodbines, about the thrill of seeing Stanley Matthews play and drinking a pint with the great, towering goalkeeper, Frank Swift.

The last day was the worst. Looking sad, sullen and resentful of those of us remaining at home, they went on a final walk around the city centre on the morning of their departure. In the early afternoon, stealing a glimpse of the Shannon, flowing imperviously to the sea, the smell of E.G. Fitt's roasted coffee lingering in their nostrils, they waited forlornly until Gerry Mason, the head-porter of the G.N.R., appeared and beckoned them on board the bus for the Limerick Junction.

Presiding calmly over this and all other life at the city centre was John Kelly, a policeman ordained to conduct Limerick's traffic. To the black-faced and good-humoured dockers and the white-visaged and breathless men from Ranks the measured wave of John Kelly's baton was a reassuring salute on their daily journeyings. This Barbarolli in blue was always considerate to workers on their bikes.

But this scene presented a different picture to the outward bound exiles. As the bus set off for the Junction, past the big policeman in the middle of O'Connell Street, many a desolate, sidelong look was given at that well worn monument to a lost youth - Burton's Billiard Saloon.

And today, how many graduates of Burton's Academy of Life, at home or scattered throughout the world, still remember that once popular old Limerick catch-cry, taken from the imaginary poster which carried the shattering, red-hot news:

"Burton's Burned Down - Thousands Homeless!"