

CORNER BOYS



Man has stood at street corners since ancient times. When primitive man came down from his home in a tree he raised himself up on hind legs and surveyed his new surroundings. The coast being clear, he leaned his back against the tree, scratched the sole of his foot against its bark and stood at ease. The striking of this pose gave birth to a new form of **homo sapiens**, which in time became known as the corner boy.

So through the ages, men have continued to cluster at street corners. In old drawings and etchings some of the figures look as if they have been chiselled out of the stone walls behind them. Standing like gaping gargoyles, these were the silent sections of the species. And the hunched shoulders, the perk of the cap and the hands in the pocket can all be clearly discerned on close examination.

Limerick, as befitting a city with its rich heritage, has had a continuous succession of corner boys through the centuries. But the "boys" did not always meet with universal tolerance and approval. Their indolent indifference and inactivity was often frowned on by some of their more industrious city and rural brethren. And schoolteachers and priests regularly warned young boys about the dangers and evils that would most certainly follow from spending their days and nights at street corners.

Corners were not the only gathering places on the city's streets. Individual preferences were often the determining factor in the choice of location. One central spot was the entrance to Liston's Medical Hall in O'Connell Street. It was as if the men hoped that some of the dignity and respectability of the old-fashioned chemist shop would be transmitted to themselves. Many of the men who congregated there were keen followers of Gaelic games, and hurling matches were nightly replayed and analysed.

The long-mirrored vestibule of Burton's was the haunt of soccer fans. Further along O'Connell Street and almost directly across the street from Nestor's shop, bookies' clerks, disqualified jockeys, greyhound trainers and trick o'the loop men kept their own counsel outside Laird's Medical Hall.

Tinsley's corner at the junction of William Street and Gerald Griffin Street was manned by a disgruntled bunch of hard-chaws and tappers. Because of the close proximity of the various

by Joe Malone

markets, this area was the traditional shopping centre for country people. The daily parade of rural folk incurred the wrath of the corner boys, who spent most of their verbal energy lampooning and lambasting the tight-fisted "country mugs".

But the mood of the place would change dramatically when a salt boat from Siberia appeared on the Shannon. As if by spontaneous action, Tinsley's would burst into life. The big green gate would fly open; jute bags would be handed out to workers, with horse-

nails to fasten the bags round their necks and, dressed like druids, caps back to front to keep the salt from flowing down their backs, the unloading began. This sudden explosion of activity upset the unhurried tempo of the corner boys' diurnal routine and, like MPs crossing the floor of the House, many of them - perhaps fearing contamination by the frenetic activity - crossed the street to a safer vantage point.

But there was some hopeful consolation. As the task of unloading the cargo neared completion, publicans often came to their doors with satisfied smiles on their faces. This was also a signal for the watchful observers. Salty



The well-known Limerick character, Steve "Mack", at his post.

work meant thirsty men. The corner boys would begin to sidle along towards the nearest pub. On these occasions they believed firmly in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Another corner where city and rural people intermingled was Clohessy's of the Mall. The Baal's Bridge brigade cast a street-wise look at the long line of spalpeens who shuffled up and down the Irishtown. The spalpeens came into Limerick from the surrounding counties and stayed in the rough, overcrowded lodging houses of Broad Street, Mungret Street and High Street. In spring and summer times they lined the wall of the Abbey river and waited, famine-faced and homeless, for the farmers to hire them. The clippity-clop echoes of their half-laced, hob-nailed boots along the footpaths of the Irishtown beat a dirge to the passing of these forgotten casualties of rural life.

O'Doherty's stonecutter's corner at Mathew Bridge catered for a better class of person. A long line of men, many of them ex-British soldiers from nearby Watergate and Palmerstown, stood underneath the jutting eaves-chutes, the long-standing members facing Bank Place and the novices turning their attention to the Custom House. As the senior men died or emigrated, shifts of position took place and the younger members, as in the ceremony of the changing of the guard, stepped round the corner into the coveted positions. The sound of the stonecutters, as they shaped and dressed the stone, and the gentle murmurings of the Abbey river provided a pleasant background chorus.

The railway corner was rarely without its complement of jarveys, newsvendors and bag-carriers. This colourful collection seemed like the Dorian Grays of Limerick and never showed signs of stress or strain. The low, bow-shaped windows of the building were reserved for the older men, who rested on their laurels there. The first person to arrive at the corner every morning was a man named Gerdie. Having arranged the day's newspapers on the windowsills, he would stand back to admire his handiwork, like the curator of an art gallery. Gerdie's first customer every morning was Mr Busoli, the Italian statue-maker from Boherbuoy, riding his bike and singing his Neopolitan love songs, on his way for his daily swim in the Shannon. "**Bon giorno**, Gerdie. Good day to you, sir, and how is the Pope today?" "**Bene**", he would answer himself, as he continued his journey.

A dispersal of the railway corner boys occurred in the 'fifties when some unusually-dressed young men appeared on the scene. Wearing tight drainpipe trousers and with wavy, oily hair, the strangers were known as Teddy boys. As the disturbed corner



A tossing "school" at the Pike, circa 1935.

boys began to drift, some found a new sheltering place under the canopy of the Lyric cinema. There they would huddle under the green slated roof, dressed in black top-coats and peak caps. In winter the only sign of life to be seen would be the whites of their Pooka-like eyes or when one of them struck a match to light his pipe. In the mornings most of them would pass the time in the warm reading room of the Carnegie Library. In summertime the group would divide into two sections; some would sit and drape their bodies on the steps of Tait's clock; others would keep Thomas Spring Rice company in the People's Park.

The Goose's Corner was the Park man's house of parliament. Where once geese were bought and sold one could see a circle of men's heads going up and down as their eyes followed the flight of a pair of halfpennies curling in the air like tumbler pigeons. Here was the Monte Carlo of Corbally. This all-male pitch-and-toss school continued on Sunday after Sunday, except during Lent and mission times, when the fliers, flanker and motty would be replaced by medals, candles and beads.

An ill-assorted group, many with lively turns of phrase, graced Dick Devane's corner, on the boundary of St. Mary's and St. Nicholas' parishes. This was a multi-cultured place, frequented by bought-out fishermen, retired basketmakers, wits, wags and rugby followers, whose conviviality and religious fervour no other corner could match. On the final night of the annual retreat of the Redemptorist Arch-Confraternity the regulars were

augmented by men from all over the parish, candles sticking from their pockets. At the sound of St. Mary's Fife and Drum Band, the resolute men stepped it out - a mixture of piety and porter on parade - to the church to renounce Satan and all his works and pomps. The streets near the corner became famous during the Eucharistic Congress for the legends displayed on some religious banners. The banners having been switched, passers-by were amused to read the following: "Feed my lambs and feed my sheep" between two butcher's stalls; "Soul of my Saviour" and "My God and my all" between two cobblers and "We pledge our lives to Thee" hanging from the three golden balls of a pawnbroker.

Some Sinn Feiners (old) held nightly war councils outside the British Rail offices, and kept an eye out for enemy agents. The city's regular corner boys did not mix, meddle or make with these street parliamentarians.

They are almost all gone now, those familiar figures of Limerick's yesteryear. Only a few diehards remain to keep alive the venerable tradition. These stragglers are to be seen, on and off, mainly in the Englishtown, at Dick Devane's and Ellie Doyle habitmaker's corner. And train travellers to and from Colbert Station may also occasionally catch a first or last glimpse of some of the fugitive survivors at the railway corner. So, while there is still time, let us salute these pioneering men, who opted for an alternative lifestyle long before the term "drop-out" became fashionable, and whose very existence is a public protest against the work ethic.

